

Mirage of Blaze volume 4: Amber Meteor Storm

Kuwabara Mizuna

Chapter 1: The Unsleeping Moon

The clock rounded midnight.

Upon rushing to the hospital, Narita Yuzuru and Chiaki Shuuhei asked for the room number at the reception desk, then began running down the corridor without pausing for breath.

"..."

They stopped, panting.

A young man sat with his arms wrapped around his knees in front of a hospital room door.

He raised his head towards them.

Yuzuru's eyes widened.

"...Taka...ya..."

"..."

Takaya stared at them dazedly, voicelessly. Yuzuru hugged him instinctively

"Takaya! Takaya, are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?"

He shook Takaya's shoulders, but Takaya made no response. There was gauze covering his cheek, his clothes were torn and stained in spots with blood, but he did not appear to have sustained any major external injuries.

"...Thank goodness..." Yuzuru murmured with effort, and sighed deeply. Chiaki's gaze went to the hospital room door.

A 'no visitors' sign hung from it.

"Kagetora..." he said, but Takaya didn't respond. Chiaki softly opened the door.

The small room held a single bed. A pulse meter emitted monotonous light traces, and drops from an intravenous drip silently fell at measured intervals.

Upon the bed lay the unconscious form of Kokuryou. A large oxygen mask covered his mouth, and there was a bandage wrapped around his head.

His body was in critical condition, and his life hung suspended. Yuzuru looked at him over Chiaki's shoulder.

"His wife...died..."

"I"

Yuzuru and Chiaki turned.

Takaya mumbled in a choked voice, "She had burns over her entire body, and her internal organs ruptured, and...she passed away earlier. Gramps, too...to protect me... If he doesn't regain consciousness tonight...they're saying that his life will be in danger. Even though I was only scratched...even though nothing happened to me..."

"Takaya."

"Why—" Takaya muttered, his voice a guttural groan, "why wasn't it me?"

"..."

"Why was it them...? Why did it have to be them? Even though they didn't do anything...they never did anything...so why did this happen?...why did this happen to them?...why...?!" Takaya moaned in anguish. And he said nothing more as he crouched there by the door, arms around his head, shoulders shaking.

It had been something akin to a miracle that he'd been unharmed in that explosion—in the pillar of fire [Jikou Temple](#) had become in the strike of an unknown attacker. Or perhaps Takaya's

<<power>> had quickly manifested itself, though it managed to protect only him.

It had taken everything he had to take Kokuryou and escape from that terrible blaze, which nothing could even approach. When the fire trucks arrived (evidently they could move here), the firefighters had entered the raging flames and somehow emerged with Kokuryou's wife—but they'd been too late.

There had been no way to save her.

He could only stand and watch as the rescue workers rushed about the scene.

He could do nothing but stand there, overwhelmed by a deep sense of helplessness.

"..."

Yuzuru's gaze moved away from Takaya's agonized expression back to Kokuryou.

His bloodless face seemed to belong to a wax doll rather than to any living person, and without the aid of the respirator and the pulse meter, his breathing would almost certainly have failed by now.

Yuzuru approached the pillow.

"Narita..." Chiaki called to him. "Don't. Come out."

Yuzuru made no reply. He stood at Kokuryou's pillow and looked down at his face.

"..."

But—then.

Kokuryou's eyelids, stiff as wax, moved feebly, almost indiscernibly.

Chiaki went to join Yuzuru, his eyes widening. Kokuryou's eyelids opened then, just the slightest bit.

"Has he regained consciousness?"

"!"

At Chiaki's words, Takaya sprung to his feet and rushed to the pillow.

"Gramps! Hey, Gramps!" he shouted desperately, but Kokuryou made no

reaction. The blind slivers of his eyes were fixed on the ceiling.

"Gramps! Gramps!"

He gave no sign that he had heard, but his head turned towards them weakly as if something had gradually entered his consciousness.

His gaze was fixed not on Takaya, but on Yuzuru.

"Aaah..." Kokuryou whispered almost inaudibly, and his white arm with its tube attached appeared to be reaching for Yuzuru.

"..."

A weak light flickered in his hazy eyes, and then—

"...Are you...the...Buddha...?"

Chiaki and Takaya were stunned.

His whispered faded, and he sank once more into sleep.

Frozen in place, Chiaki looked at Kokuryou, then Yuzuru.

Yuzuru looked down with quiet protectiveness at Kokuryou, then gently returned the arm reaching out for him to its place.

The Buddha—?

(What was...)

As they left the room, Chiaki said to Takaya, "I'm heading back to meet

up with Haruie. You guys stay here. Once we're finished over there, we'll come and get you."

"—"

Takaya didn't reply.

"Kagetora," Chiaki admonished him in a muted voice, "get ahold of yourself."

Takaya lifted his eyes a little.

"...Yeah."

Hearing Takaya's listless response, Chiaki glanced at Yuzuru, then walked quickly back down the corridor.

Takaya turned to Yuzuru as the sound of Chiaki's footsteps faded.

"Did Chiaki bring you...?"

"..."

"Have you already...been to see that lady—Haruie?"

"Yeah. Before we came here."

Chiaki Shuuhei—or [Yasuda Nagahide](#) , who had sensed disaster immediately upon entering [Sendai](#) , had gone with Yuzuru to meet up with Ayako at the site of the [University Hospital](#) collapse. Chiaki had promptly dispersed the suggestion on the necessary

people so that rescue work could begin. It'd been one blessing in the midst of tragedy that many of in-patients' wards had been spared, but

key medical facilities had been destroyed, and many of the staff and patients had been affected.

Once he'd finished general treatment, he had headed for Kokuryou's [Jikou Temple](#) without stopping for rest...

"I see..."

Once he'd heard the whole story, Takaya sank again into haggard silence. He slumped down to the floor against the wall.

"Takaya," Yuzuru said worriedly.

"..."

"Oh, I know. How about I go get coffee or something? You'll probably feel better after you have something to drink. I'll be right back... ?"

Yuzuru turned at a tug on his clothes as he was about to head down the corridor. Takaya, with his head against his knees, had grasped hold of Yuzuru's shirt.

"... Takaya?"

"...Stay with me..." he said—and then pleadingly, "...I'm scared..."

Those few words seemed to take all of his effort. Yuzuru looked at Takaya, then sat down next to him.

"Takaya."

"..."

After a moment of silence, Takaya opened his mouth.

"There's a morgue...on the floor below us..."

"..."

"Kokuryou's wife's remains...are there..." Takaya told him, his voice a moan. "She died crushed under the building...there's still...so much pain on her face... Her remains...from her chest down, her body is all torn and horribly burned—she was such a kind person, but her face...is full of such terrible agony, and there's yellow fluid coming out of her mouth..."

His voice cut off, and Takaya bit his lips hard.

"...I..."

"Takaya."

What was he afraid of? Even Takaya himself didn't know. Only that it didn't have anything to do with danger to himself.

The image of her body, scorched into his mind, flashed relentlessly before his eyes.

It had not been a peaceful death. That kind woman had died in hideous agony, her voice raised in an inhuman scream, her life torn brutally from her.

It was too horrific.

He had not thought that a person's last moments could be this terrible.

The terror paralyzed even grief.

That cold darkness was preparing even now to swallow up yet another kind person.

He gripped Yuzuru's hands as they encircled him. Right now he needed Yuzuru's warmth—the warmth of another living being.

"...Don't go anywhere..."

Takaya closed his eyes tightly.

The strength of Yuzuru's arms. The steady beating of his heart.

Warm hands.

Like two small birds afraid of the dark, they huddled together in a corner of the corridor.

They could do nothing now but endure.

They could do nothing but await the morning.

"All right. It looks like accommodations have been found for all of the injured," Chiaki, who had rendezvoused with Ayako at the hospital collapse site, said while surveying the surrounding area. The rescue workers who had rushed in after him in patrol cars and fire engines were busily running around taking care of the rest.

Kadowaki Ayako—[Kakizaki Haruie](#) —nodded in response, relief on her face.

"It looks like they're able to carry out the rescue work now that you've removed the suggestion. Thank you for that."

"You don't need to thank me. And I can't hold this for long in any case."

"Eh?"

Chiaki grumbled, frowning, "The suggestion will remain as long as this [Dakiniten](#) curse is in place. Though I've removed it for now, we'll end up right

back where we started if the curse isn't eliminated. If this happens somewhere else, you'll get the same non-reaction all over again."

Ayako's face was also grim. "Then we have to eliminate the curse."

"Yeah. ...But..."

One of the police officers working on the cleanup came over to them.

"Thank you very much for notifying us. How are your injuries?"

"Eh...ah, they're fine..." Ayako lightly lifted her right arm, which was suspended by a white cloth. "It doesn't seem that serious."

"But I wonder what happened. Nobody reported an accident of this magnitude for four hours. It's almost as if nobody noticed..." The police officer tilted his head at them eagerly, and Ayako and Chiaki looked back at him sourly. "There are some things I would like to ask

you; if possible, I would like you to come down with me to the station..."

"That's fine, but there's not much sense in you investigating us, is there?"

"Wha?" The police officer looked puzzled.

"At this rate, you'll suddenly return to yourself in the midst of your investigations saying: 'Huh? What am I doing here?' Go home before the story gets complicated. Once we've removed the curse, we'll let you know the circumstances in full."

"Huh? Um...wait."

"There's something we need to do first. Haruie."

"Right."

The two of them glanced at the police officer, then walked towards the large cave-in created by the destruction of the building.

The cave-in formed a gigantic crater.

Chiaki peered in and snorted. "Humph. So they're making this crater the 'platform' of the spell. Pretty damn tasteless, if you ask me."

"The 'platform' is a 'spell platform' created with spiritual powers. One that doesn't use tools."

"It'd be too noticeable if they were to bury some temple's incense altar here, though, wouldn't it?"

"What do you think? Should we ambush them here?"

"I don't fancy waiting for them in the night wind, so let's leave a proxy," Chiaki said, extracting a small **kokeshi** -like doll from his jacket pocket that fit on the palm of his hand.

"They would've already noticed that we're on the move. They'll probably come armed to the teeth this time. I don't think this'll hold 'em off, but it should at least buy us some time."

Ayako's eyes widened.

"That's..."

"It's a koppashin made from the sacred tree that stands on **Mount Kouya** 's holy ground. I didn't want to come empty-handed, so I came prepared with a few of these. ...Those Mogami guys will have to deal with this for a while, and we'll work Kagetora over for the battle ahead. We have to get rid of that curse on Sendai ASAP."

"Neutralize the curse?"

"Yeah. But we have to make sure they won't cast any more curses. The quickest way would be to kill the caster, but it's a spirit in possession of a body this time around, which is bothersome. The spirit won't disappear even if the host is killed. So..."

"<<**Choubuku** >>, then?"

Chiaki stooped to place the koppashin on the ground.

"We're the only ones who can do it. Fitting, isn't it."

"I wonder if that's why they wanted to get rid of Kagetora?"

"We're the natural enemies of the [onryou](#) ."

"But the problem is how to neutralize the curse after that. How do we get rid of it if it's already completed?"

"That's true." Chiaki folded his arms. "If we're not mistaken about it being '[kinrin no hou](#) '...I've

never handled a curse of this magnitude before. And we still don't know what they're planning to do with it either. But for now..." Chiaki dropped to one knee and joined his hands in a ritual gesture.

"[On deibayakisha mandamanda kakakaka sowaka](#) ."

The [koppashin](#) ,

an object representation of a divine spirit, could house the descent of various deities. Chiaki had apparently planned to call [Shoumen Kongou](#) to this particular [koppashin](#) .

"O Great [Shoumen Kongou](#) . I pray thee thrash all those who would step within this ground. Let all thy sworn enemies be destroyed. —[On deibayakisha mandamanda kakakaka sowaka](#) ."

Then Chiaki drew a large 'un2' symbol, the [seed syllable](#) of Exalted [Shoumen Kongou](#) , in midair with his finger.

He turned to Ayako.

"Let's leave it to him and go meet Kagetora."

"[Shoumen Kongou](#) is the deity associated with the [Koushin](#) beliefs, right? Can we hold back Mogami with this?"

"**Shoumen Kongou** is by nature a fierce god who is a protector of Buddhism. He drives

away the calamities of evil beasts, diseases, and thunder. Since we're up against foxes here, he's perfect."

"So we're fighting foxes with the monkey? What if he does a 'see no evil, hear no evil, speak no evil'?"

"Sheesh, y'know..."

The two walked towards the car. Around the terrible cave-in swirled a chaotic mass of personnel dealing with incident control. No one even noticed the tiny **koppashin** they had left behind.

As the long night brightened, Takaya and Yuzuru, along with Chiaki and Ayako (who had gone to pick them up), got a room in a hotel near town, which would thereafter act as their base of operations.

Though Kokuryou had not regained consciousness, he was out of danger for the time being.

Ayako, who had placed the call, replaced the receiver and said, "I've given the hospital my contact information, so they'll call me immediately if anything happens. I know you're worried, but let's leave it to the doctors."

"Yeah."

Takaya didn't even look at her. Ayako was anxious about the shock he had certainly received, but he was surprisingly calm. His responses and behavior were collected, and there was neither agitation nor carelessness in his speech or conduct. On the contrary.

He didn't seem particularly concerned about Kokuryou.

"Kagetora...?"

Ayako had to think it odd.

Takaya ignored her, instead fixing his gaze on the map spread out in the middle of the Japanese-style room.

"So you're saying that the fifth barrier point was completed in the middle of all the confusion last night, Chiaki?"

"Yeah," Chiaki responded, paying no attention to Takaya's unnatural calm. "The one at the [Toukoku University Department of Agriculture](#) . They've spelled shut the gap you guys pulled open over there. Kagetora, it looks like 'kinrin no hou ' is almost certainly what they're planning."

""Kinrin no hou '?"

"It was a spell performed in the old days at the emperor's enthronement, a powerful spell that used [Dakiniten](#) to strengthen the emperor's controlling power and destroy those who

rebel against him. I've also heard that it induces mass hypnosis, so I'm pretty sure that's what this is."

"But the barrier in question isn't completed yet?"

"You're talking about the barrier at the city center? It's more of a gigantic platform than a barrier. The 'kinrin no hou' is completed by linking platforms positioned in eight directions. The completion of the fifth means that the power of the curse is at 70%. But we can still cancel out the suggestion for about an hour or so. If the eighth barrier is set, the eight-degree 'kinrin no hou'—in other words, a completed ritual—will mean that the power of the hypnotic suggestion also becomes perfect. If that happens, I probably won't be able to cancel out the suggestion."



"Then what should we..."

"Geez, and we don't even know what they're plotting to do with the barrier. Anyhow, it wouldn't be wise to leave the curse lying about. If nothing else, we should at least completely dissolve the barrier first."

"I think we can manage the invocation of the dead with [jichinhou](#) ," Ayako entered the conversation.

"But the problem is the '[kinrin no hou](#) ' and [Dakiniten-hou](#) . We don't know how to neutralize them even if the invocations are canceled..."

"Neutralize?"

"A way to break the curse—actually, using a curse to break a curse.

Ordinarily we break them by performing an exorcism or purification, but sometimes for strong, difficult curses for which those don't work, we'll also use neutralization," Ayako said, making a face. "Based on the effects and nature of a curse, you can find something that is naturally its opposite, though the neutralizing spell is different from either curse."

"So what's the curse that'll neutralize the '[kinrin no hou](#) '?"

"I was thinking maybe something from one of the Exalted [Five Great Kings of Wisdom](#) , but we don't have enough data," Ayako shrugged. Chiaki crossed his arms.

"Naoe or Irobe would know a lot more, but—damn."

"Naoe..."

Takaya's expression changed the slightest bit. It was Yuzuru who followed up with, "Have we still not heard from Naoe-san? You said that he's in [Yamagata](#) ..."

Both Ayako and Chiaki suddenly scowled.

"We...haven't heard from him."

"Oh no. But then..."

"Even if something's happened, we haven't got the time to go rescue him. We can only do what we can here," Chiaki said, pointing at the map. "Thankfully, this barrier has a weak point. Look here."

"?"

"The Date family's burial place at [Kyougamine](#) is within the barrier. It's sacred ground of considerable power. They were probably thinking of barricading it with spells, but contrary to what they anticipated, the power produced by the sacred ground was too strong. If we want to destroy the barrier, this is definitely the place to do it from."

"But that certainly would not pass under Mogami's notice. He'll be bringing an army to lay waste to [Kyougamine](#) ."

[Date Masamune](#) 's face came to Takaya's mind. —If Mogami were to attack [Kyougamine](#) , Masamune would probably not stand quietly by. Its peace would be

destroyed. If that happened, it could become an excuse for all-out war.

"Ugh. I really don't want to rouse Date."

"..."

Takaya was silent for a moment with his own thoughts, then lifted his eyes. "In any case, we should perform <<[choubuku](#)>> on the caster first. I'll do something about neutralizing the curse. Haruie."

Ayako raised her head abruptly, startled. "Ri-right..."

"I'll leave him to you. The 'koko' of Dakiniten should disappear at least, if we deal with the person controlling them. We'll exorcise Mogami's onshou."

"I-I got it."

"I'll come with you," Chiaki volunteered. "Keep an eye out for the people trying to kill you. Mogami's onshou are out to get you with 'koko' or whatever else. Otherwise, there'd be no point in that flashy explosion earlier."

Takaya's eyes sharpened. "You're saying that they involved Kokuryou-san and his wife on purpose?"

"Who knows? Anyway, you haven't eaten anything since last night, right? You've gotta be hungry. Narita, can you get some takeout from somewhere?"

"Huh? Aaah...yeah." Yuzuru stood obediently. "You guys rest. I'll go find something."

"I'll go with you." Ayako followed.

Yuzuru and Ayako left the room and walked down the hall side by side, where the carpet was being cleaned.

"It's weird, don't you think...?"

"?"

Yuzuru turned to see a dubious look on Ayako's face and tilted his head at

her.

"What is?"

"Mmm. The way he's behaving," Ayako replied doubtfully, a hand under her chin. "His expression is odd. Or maybe not odd, but I thought that he'd be in despair or moping in a corner by himself after going through so much..."

Yuzuru regarded Ayako silently.

"I heard...from Nagahide earlier—that Kokuryou-san's wife died."

"..."

"But that's not how he looks. I don't see any sadness or fear in him.

No child can be so calm after seeing someone murdered. Especially someone like him, whose emotions are so unstable—he shouldn't be able to stay that calm. What's happened? What's happened inside of him?"

Ayako pressed Yuzuru. "He called me Haruie. That's right—that expression of his, it's almost as if—"

"Ayako-san," Yuzuru interrupted, then shut his mouth. The elevator arrived, and they got on and pressed the button for the lobby. Yuzuru sighed as he waited for the door to close.

"I can't read what Takaya's thinking either."

"You can't?"

"No. He's not a lively or cheerful person, but he experiences emotions

strongly and wears his heart on his sleeve, so you can usually immediately tell what he's thinking... But I couldn't this time, for the first time."

"What...does that mean?"

"I don't know. But this is the first time I've seen that expression in Takaya's eyes," Yuzuru said dejectedly. "Even when he's pretending to be good and follow the rules after getting slapped down for going up against the teachers at school, there's still this glint of humiliation or resentment in his eyes. His emotions are expressed only in his eyes, like he's a wild beast baring his teeth, ready to go for his enemy's throat..."

"..."

"But nothing of Takaya's feelings is reflected in his eyes right now. It's not that he's calm or collected. It's something else...something scarier..." Weary with the effort of putting what he could not express into words, Yuzuru bit his lip. "I guess I feel like he's throwing himself away."

"Yuzuru-kun."

"Yes, that's what it is! As if...he feels like he could have prevented Kokuryou-san's wife from dying if he could have used that <<power>>. If he were Kagetora...so he wants to stop being Ougi Takaya. That must be it!"

Takaya stood alone by the window, gazing out at the sky covered with broken clouds.

He had come to understand how very powerless he was this night.

He could think of nothing but—

If only I'd been stronger—

He wanted that from the bottom of his heart. Just that.

He'd let someone he should have protected die. As night transformed into dawn, regret over what could not be redone transformed into a desire that overrode everything else.

Only power. Only strength.

A longing with the intensity of prayer.

To have an absolute strength.

What could he give in exchange? If it could not be obtained without a price.

Kagetora's power.

In order to obtain that power—

What could he give in compensation for the granting of his wish?

Takaya gazed outside.

"Kagetora..." Chiaki said to his back. "You should prepare yourself regarding Naoe."

"...!"

"The next time you see him, he probably won't be 'Tachibana Yoshiaki' anymore."

"What are you talking about?"

"We don't know if anything has happened to Naoe's body, but if by any chance something has, he'll abandon his current host and possess some other body. Which means that he'll no longer be the 'Tachibana Yoshiaki' Naoe that you know."

"But..."

"There's also the chance that his soul will be bound and manipulated using hypnotic suggestion. In the worst case, you have to be prepared to kill him and perform <<choubuku >> on his soul, Kagetora."

The corners of Takaya's mouth stiffened slightly.

So this was the cruelty of the mission imposed on them?

This cold-heartedness capable of using those of lesser rank as sword fodder.

Did one take that cold-heartedness upon oneself in order to grow stronger? Had Kagetora carried it within him? Was that the meaning of strength?

(Naoe—...)

He suddenly longed for Naoe's smile. Even while his words had been stern, there had been an endless gentleness in the depths of his eyes.

Was it strength to be able to lose that without losing his composure?

And yet—

If becoming that person meant that he would no longer protect those he should protect.

(I...)

Takaya's brows creased against those thoughts.

Chiaki stared at Takaya silently. Just as he seemed about to speak again—

"!"

A sharp sensation grazed Chiaki's sixth sense.

Shoumen Kongou —

He grinned with a hand pressed against his forehead.

"So you've shown yourself..."

"What?"

"Looks like our guests have been spotted at the site, Kagetora. We should go give them a proper welcome."

Takaya's hard gaze was focused in midair.

A black rain began to fall.

Chapter 2: Hariti

On the night of the explosion at [Jikou Temple](#) , a crescent moon shone upon [Yamagata](#) .

The door of the godown opened with a heavy, ponderous sound.

It was already ten p.m. [Yoshihime](#) , also known as [Ohigashi-no-Kata](#) , entered with several attendants.

"Dost thou refuse to obey us still?"

At the sound of her voice, Naoe, still suspended from the manacles, raised weary eyes. Perhaps he no longer had strength to speak; he only looked at her blearily.

"Hmm. It doth appear that thou art at thy limit."

Ohigashi approached and smiled at Naoe's pale face.

"Thou canst not fight us in that state. We shall make thee our puppet. We will make much benefit of thy power in our unification of the country. Now—" Ohigashi lifted Naoe's chin and stared into his pupils.

"Ugh..."

Naoe's eyes instantly blurred, and the world swayed. Ohigashi's strong gaze locked his in place.

It was a powerful hypnotic technique. The words of suggestion flowing into him were crafted to steal away his will.

<<Thou art our servant...>>

<<Thou shalt obey no command but ours...>>

<<Thou shalt move to our will.>>

"Unngh..."

Groaning in pain, Naoe wrung out the last remaining dredges of his power, concentrating it between his brows and glaring back at her.

"Thou—"

Slightly agitated, Ohigashi poured even greater power into her suggestion. But Naoe continued to repel her with sheer tenacious force of will. Ohigashi's face warped in annoyance.

"!"

She dealt a sharp slap to Naoe's cheek.

"Thou impudent knave...!" she said menacingly, "Thy resistance is in vain. Soon or late thy strength will fail thee. Or dost thou wish more pain before thou wilt obey us?"

"__"

Naoe closed his eyes tightly. For a moment Ohigashi's hands appeared to tremble before she slapped his cheek again with all her might.

"Thou damned obstinate wretch!" she flung at him in rage, before turning

on her heels and leaving the godown.

(How dare he...!)

Several days had passed since his capture. She had attempted hypnotism such as this on him countless times, but this man, perhaps because of prior training, had not given in. She had waited until his will was weakened to try again, but he still doggedly resisted.

(Though he is unable to even use <<power>>!)

That impudent...she was thinking with a tsk of her tongue, when a voice spoke to her from behind.

"How dost thou, Yoshi?"

Mogami Yoshiaki walked over to her with his hands tucked into the sleeves of his kimono.

"Aniue ."

"Doth that man yet resist the manipulation of thy power?"

"Yes—" Ohigashi, calming her rage somewhat, answered in disappointment.

"Though he still resists most stubbornly, 'tis but a matter a time before his will breaks in his state of exhaustion. My power is more than enough to tame a rat or two of his ilk."

"I see. Then I will entrust the rest to you."

"Aniue ?" Ohigashi peered at Yoshiaki. "Dost thou intend to go

somewhere?"

"Mmm. I am going to Tokyo. There is work to be done on the party executives. The committee which is the driving force behind the transfer of the capital is meeting to polish the relocation plan such that an extraordinary session of the Diet can be called at the end of the next month."

"So at last the time hath come."

"Yes. At last." A quiet smile filled Yoshiaki's face. "So too, the <<jike-kekkai>> on Sendai be will completed tomorrow, and our servants in Sendai will immediately begin to move. Then will the people of Sendai give everything they have according to our command for the single goal of making the 'Capital relocation to Sendai' a reality."

"..."

"If the transfer of the capital should be approved by the National Diet, construction of facilities and projects for outfitting of the city would be announced immediately. It would have a great impact upon the budget, and each government office must be pushed to make the necessary preparations quickly. The transfer of government agencies must begin without delay. Construction must commence on the new National Diet hall in Sendai , and the prefectural assembly must be moved. And once the transfer is complete, there will be more work for the doing in the remodeling of the administration of the islands."

Mogami Yoshiaki 's eyes glinted.

"We will control some few of the prefectures and create a wide-area local administration. We will use our [onshou](#) of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> as intermediaries to govern the area. Namely, [daimyo](#) self-government. For this endeavor we will take in all of the [onshou](#) as subordinates of the Mogami."

"And those who refuse...?"

Yoshiaki snorted a laugh.

"They shall be prey to the foxes."

As he walked towards the pond, Yoshiaki added, "[Ashina Moriuji](#) hath already made the necessary arrangements in Tokyo. So too doth my son Yoshiyasu have [Sendai](#) well in hand. His [Dakiniten-hou](#) is stronger than I anticipated. I shall make fullest use of him."

"Hath he succeeded in the extermination of that rat's fellows?"

"Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) ?

Hmm. He who cannot even exterminate demons hath not the right to be called a general." Yoshiaki turned to Ohigashi. "I shall leave affairs here to Kojirou and thee. [Date Kojirou](#) is the precious right arm of the Mogami. Be sure to assure him of that.

...And that I shall destroy that damned wretch Masamune, who killed his own brother."

"[Aniue](#) ."

"[Sendai](#) belongs to Date no longer, but to Mogami," Yoshiaki declared, and turned on his heels. "Soon we shall go to clean out [Sendai](#) . We shall sweep away all the Date [onryou](#) . Tell him that as well."

"... Yes."

"Ah, and that man," he said, looking towards the godown. "He will likely attempt suicide when driven into a corner. Allow him no opportunity to choke to death by biting off his own tongue."

She saw Yoshiaki off, then peered at her own reflection in the pond.

Masamune's face suddenly appeared on the water's surface.

(A demon?—)

The wind ruffled the pond surface, and the reflection melted into the waves

Was this the end?

Naoe was indeed at his limit.

He had not seen the sun for many days. How long had he been imprisoned in this <<kyuuryoku-kekkaiki >>

cage? He had been given no food at all, only water. His body and mind were so weakened that though he had somehow been able to refuse Ohigashi, he probably no longer had the strength to do it again.

He had no strength left with which to resist her if she used her powers on him again.

(Can I go...no further...?)

Whatever else might happen, he could not allow himself to be controlled

through hypnotic suggestion, for they would certainly pervert his extraordinary <<powers>>. As one of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) , that one thing he could not allow.

The manacles did not seem to contain any weaknesses. He had one way left of escaping before being used by them.

(Abandon this body—)

There was no other path open to him.

Unlike ordinary spirits, [kanshousha](#) could not freely leave a living body once they were in possession of

it. They could not part from the body while it lived. So to switch bodies, death of their current body was necessary.

In other words—suicide.

No matter how difficult a barrier this was, it did not have the power to <<bind>> a spirit. He could become a spirit to escape and seek a new host body.

The decision pressed upon him. Since his hands were tied, he would not be able to use any tools. He could only bite off his own tongue.

(—This is no time to hesitate.)

He would not be able to do it if left with no strength at all.

(Throw away Tachibana Yoshiaki...) he thought, but the faces of his family came unexpectedly to his mind. They slipped into his strained thoughts, and he hesitated.

These were the faces of the people he had lived with for the past twenty-eight years. For these many years Tachibana Yoshiaki's family had been [Naoe Nobutsuna](#) 's family. Though he was probably nothing but a sham, they were a real family to him.

Would the corpse be returned to his parents? How would they take the sudden death of their son? Would much grief would he be putting them through?

He knew all too well. Even were he not Naoe, as Tachibana Yoshiaki the priest he had seen many bereaved families say goodbye to the dearly departed over the years.

Regret flashed through his chest. —He would not feel this way if he had been the kind of heartless person whose life or death mattered to no one. If like [Yasuda Nagahide](#) he had cut off all ties to the family of his host body from the start, he would probably not think twice about its death.

In this he was weak. It was probably ludicrous for them to be so fixated on ordinary human emotions when their very existence ran counter to all the laws of nature.

And yet—

"If you should throw away your heart..."

The words that Kagetora had said to him so long ago came echoing back to him.

"If you should throw away your heart, you will become nothing more than

true yasha ."

In the many times they had been in these situations, Kagetora had always moved them with these words.

You must not abandon yourself.

Don't give up until the very end.

"You can live this finite life only once, so endeavor to grieve no more of those who love you... Because it is the only thing that we, who put our borrowed lives at risk, can do. And I will never abandon you." And then he had given them a quiet smile.

When had that been?

(Kagetora-sama...)

Naoe shut his eyes tightly against the irrepressible warmth rising in his chest. —But he could no longer do that.

Theirs was an existence that could be forgiven only because of their mission—so when the very end came, they could not do otherwise than discard their human emotions in order to fulfill that mission.

He had probably suffered with that knowledge.

(Please forgive me...)

He apologized in his heart to his faraway family, though he knew that it could not reach them. Then, his mind resolved, Naoe positioned his tongue between his teeth.

But at that moment—

His eyes opened in surprise at the sound of the godown door opening.

A young man stood at the entrance. The moonlight illuminated his face. It was—

(! [Date Kojiro](#) !)

This is it, then, Naoe thought in despair, and bit down, but.

"Don't!"

"!"

An unseen force forcibly wrenched open Naoe's mouth and froze his jaws at the young man's cry, prevented his suicide.

(He's not going to let me die...?!)

As Naoe glared at him with loathing, Kojiro stuffed the towel in his hand in Naoe's mouth and tied it behind his head so that when he released his <<power>>, Naoe could no longer kill himself.

"What is the meaning of this?" Naoe mumbled. "Are you here to use your arts on me again?" he demanded coldly, but for some reason Kojiro only looked at him sadly.

"?"

Then, as Naoe stared at him with surprise, Kojiro took out a tiny key and began working to unfasten the manacles around Naoe's wrist.

(Huh...?)

Kojirou wordlessly released the shackles and helped Naoe to a sitting position on the floor.

"...What are you..."

"Take thou this opportunity to escape."

"!"

He involuntarily stared at Kojirou.

"Wh... Why..."

"Hurry hence. Now, while Uncle is not here. While Mother hath not yet noticed...hurry!"

"Wait. Wait a moment...You..."

Kojirou warily kept a close watch on his surroundings.

"I have released the barrier. Thou canst use thy <<power>>

once more. Hurry thou to escape. Mother and the people of the house are

seeing Uncle off at this moment . 'Tis your chance."

"Seeing your uncle off...? You mean [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) ? Where is he going? What is he planning?!"

"Ssh! I know not the finer points. It appears he goes towards Tokyo. He hath said that he will leave [Yamagata](#) to Mother and me..."

"Tokyo? What in the world is he planning this time...!"

"If thou dost not make haste towards [Sendai](#) now, 'twill be too late. Sendai's <<[jike-kekka](#)i >> will be completed tomorrow. And then [Yamagata](#) 's [onryou](#) —and the [nue](#) —will begin to converge upon [Sendai](#) in earnest. In order to annihilate the spirits of the Date in [Sendai](#) ."

"!"

"Thou must tell thy friends in [Sendai](#) forthwith. I know not how many would become victims of the [onryou](#) 's violence. If the '[kinrin no hou](#) ' should become effective, the [onryou](#) will have free rein. Thou must haste to stop them!"

"Why...why are you telling me this? Aren't you with Mogami?!"

"..."

For a moment Kojirou's face twisted with pain.

"I... Yes, 'tis true, I am with Uncle. When I was killed by my brother Masamune, my regret was such that I could not rest in peace, much though I desired it."

"..."

"But I did not come back to do battle with my brother! Nor do I wish to take revenge on him!" the young man pleaded desperately. "I am Kojirou of the Date. I am the younger brother of [Date Masamune](#) !

I am not here from hostility towards my brother. I desired...I desired to say to him that I wish to meet him one more time. I wish him to continue suffering no longer. That is what I would tell him! That never

did I hate him!"

"Kojirou-dono..."

Four hundred year earlier, as a result of Kojirou's mother, Hashunin —[Ohigashi-no-Kata](#) —attempting

to assassinate Masamune with poison to make Kojirou head of the Date. Masamune had personally pronounced his sentence. It had been the night

before the twenty-four-year-old Masamune was to enter the battle against [Odawara Castle](#) in order to prove his allegiance to Regent [Toyotomi Hideyoshi](#) .

Masamune had been forced at that time to make a choice between resisting and supporting Hideyoshi, who stood on the verge of unifying the country. If he joined the battle in Hideyoshi's offensive against the Houjou at Odawara, then he would be for Hideyoshi—if not, against. At last, after much hesitation, he had wagered the continued existence of the Date Clan on his decision to spearhead the battle against Odawara according to the Regent's command.

Kojirou himself had actually had no designs on the position of clan head. But it was also true that under those tense circumstances, his existence was a seed of calamity.

To say that he did not hate Masamune, who had killed him, was a lie. It was probably because of that hate that he was an [onryou](#) .

But how much pain had Masamune suffered, heartbroken by a mother who

had tried to kill him, overwhelmed by shame at the necessity of killing

his own younger brother? Knowing that Masamune would writhe in agony until he surmounted these feelings, Kojirou could only wonder why he hated his brother.

Was it not those who remained behind in the world of the living the ones who suffered most?

He could no longer hate. He could no longer go up against his brother. He longer wanted to fight his brother. And yes, now—

"Naoe-[uji](#) . Go to [Sendai](#) .

If thou shouldst meet my brother, tell him that I have not the least intention of hostility towards him. I will never fight against my brother!"

He grasped Naoe's shoulders, clinging to them in entreaty.

"Please...! Please tell my brother that!"



"..."

Naoe grasped Kojirou's warm hands in return, and his expression softened.

"If you wish to tell him, then go meet him yourself."

"..."

"Please tell him from your own lips. You've always wanted to, have you not? Was that not why you came back?"

"Naoe-[uji](#) ..."

"Come with me. Let's go to [Sendai](#) together."

"I shall not let thee go, Kojirou!"

"!"

He whirled, startled by the voice. Ohigashi stood there, accompanied by her retainers.

Oh no...!

Ohigashi glared at them, looking at that moment exactly like a demoness.

"How...how darest thou, thou impudent... How darest thou trick Kojirou...!"

"Mother..."

"Come here, Kojirou, to Mother's side! Thy mother shall exterminate this

rat...!"

No sooner said than a blue light flared from Ohigashi's body. Naoe caught it with his full <<powers>>. A violent plasmatic light scattered right in front of his eyes. Naoe's <<goshinheki >> had broken apart Ohigashi's <<nenpa >>.

"Thou impudent—!"

She shot an arrow-like <<nenpa >> at him. It burst into a shower of sparks in front of him. Naoe clenched his teeth and released a <<nenpa >> from his upraised fist.

"Gyaah!"

"Mother!"

Kojirou, about to run to his mother's side, was hurled violently to the ground

"Ah!"

The ground shook up and down. The tremor grew in intensity in the blink of an eye, and with a terrible sound like the trunks of the trees in the garden splitting apart, the roof tiles of the godown came sliding down.

"!"

Naoe promptly erected a <<goshinheki >> to protect Kojirou. Ohigashi was certainly not going easy on them! She aimed a mass of will point-blank at Naoe.

"Gwaah!"

The shock sent him flying. Kojirou cried out, "Please stop, Mother!"

"Come here! Kojirou! Let Mother put an end to this!"

"Mother!"

Kojirou stood protectively in front of Naoe as he got up, moaning. Rage distorted Ohigashi's sagacious face.

"Kojirou, what dost thou mean by this?!"

"Do not hurt him, Mother!"

"Thou...wouldst thou betray thy own mother...?!"

"Please remember, Mother!" Kojirou yelled desperately. "Make me fight no longer! 'Tis my only desire!"

"What dost thou say? Art thou a coward, Kojirou!"

"I do not desire to rule the country! I desire nothing if it means fighting against my brother!"

"I"

Ohigashi's face stiffened. Kojirou pleaded with intense earnestness,

"Why must we do this? Why must we fight against my brother? Why must we

annihilate Date...?!"

"Kojirou...!"

"Dost thou wish so much to rule the country? It cannot be the reason thou

hast remained in this world, unable to rest in peace!"

"..."

"Dost thou hate? Is it to take revenge on my brother that thou hast remained? Why must thou confront my brother unto death? Are my brother and I not both thy sons?"

"Be silent, Kojirou!" Ohigashi cried sharply, shaking slightly. "I shunned Bonten for the future of the Date Clan...'twas for the Date Clan! Bontenmaru was not fit to be a general! Jikumaru, thou wert so much more..."

"That's not true! My brother was the one who built the clan into a splendid 620,000-koku domain! "My brother" was the one..."

"Kojirou! Masamune had thee killed!" Ohigashi screamed. "'Twas Masamune who killed thee! He put thee, his own brother, to the sword with his own hand!"

"I do not hate my brother! He had no choice, so I do not fault him!"

"You understand not, Kojirou!"

Kojirou's shoulders jerked in surprise. Ohigashi continued in a low voice, "The heart of a mother whose child was killed... You understand not. How grieved I was. Thou knows not the heart of a mother whose child's life is stolen..."

"Mother..."

"I hate Masamune for killing my child. Though I gave birth to him in the same way, it changes not my hatred for him for killing thee."

Kojirou bit his lip sharply, then said, "...And who was it that thus drove him? Who drove him to it? All of it...was not everything thy fault, Mother!"

Ohigashi's eyes widened as if she had been struck.

"Thou wouldst...thou wouldst say...that all of it was Mother's fault?"

"Yes, I would! If thou hadst not stood me forward, it would not have happened! Was not my brother's hatred in revenge for thy love?"

Tears welled in Kojirou's eyes.

"Mother! Why didst thou not love my brother the way thou loved me? Did thou not know his loneliness? Why didst thou not love him, though he too was thy son?"

"..."

Ohigashi murmured in astonishment, "...Dost thou...blame thy mother...for that tragedy? Because I did not love Bonten... Thou wouldst say 'tis punishment?"

"..."

"Why...did I not love him...?"

"... Mother."

"Why did Mother not love Bonten...?"

Taken aback, Kojirou stared at her intently.

Large teardrops spilled from her eyes.

"There is not a day in which Mother does not think of Bonten—"

Kojirou looked at her in bewilderment. "Mother..."

"Yes, 'tis true. As thou hast said, Mother did not dote on Bonten as I did thee. But, Kojirou—"

"..."

"In the depths of Mother's heart, there are so many words that cannot be easily said to shallow outsiders!"

Naoe's eyes widened. At that moment, the moonlight shining on her

tear-streaked face lent it an almost divine light to his stunned gaze.

Ohigashi's stern face did not crumble. But that only made it seem more filled with love, a mother's face—

(Bodhisattva—...)

Ohigashi's tear-filled eyes glared at them.

"Kojirou, come what may, thou *must* take this country. This country that Masamune could not take, I *will* give to thee, whom he killed."

A shimmering pale light intensified around Ohigashi's body.

"I shall allow interference from no one! Thou shalt not interfere with Mother!"

"!"

"Mother!"

Ohigashi howled and released an intensely concentrated <<nenpa >> at Naoe with all her might.

Skreeee!

Naoe's <<goshinheki >>

blocked it right in front of them with a screech of flying sparks that pierced their ears: a violent plasmatic light, filled with the same high energy, meeting her attack!

"Graaah!"

Straining his powers, Naoe slashed the light apart with his arms.

"Gyaaaah!"

Ohigashi threw her head back, a hand pressed against her forehead. Naoe immediately shouted, "bai!"

"Naoe-*uji* !"

Her body was bound. Kojirou quickly tried to stop him, but Naoe, paying him no heed, joined his hands in the ritual gesture.

"*Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka* !"

"Stop! Please stop, Naoe-**uji** !" Kojirou clung to him.

"**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten** !" Naoe shook him off and shouted, "For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

An enormous energy gathered within Naoe's fists and in the blink of an eye became a pure white ball of light. **Ohigashi-no-Kata** could no longer move. She cried out in a voice full of hatred, <<Thou...! Damn...thee...!>>

"Stop, Naoe-**uji** !"

He could show no mercy.

"<<**Choubuku** >>!"

Flash!

Incandescence.

A violent power attacked Ohigashi.

The terrible power of <<**choubuku** >> tore Ohigashi out of her vessel and swallowed up everything near her in its raging force.

Ohigashi's horrible scream!

The light became a wind that wrapped Ohigashi away.

In the blank whiteness, Kojirou screamed, "Mother—!"

Crash.

Masamune stared intently at the broken fragments of the cup that had fallen from his hand. His wife Megohime peered at him.

"Dono...?"

Masamune looked up at the moon floating in the skies over Sendai , feeling as if someone had called his childhood name.

(Mother—...?)

The light gradually faded.

Quiet returned once more to the garden of the Ueshima mansion, where a woman's body lay.

Around her were the crumbled forms of those the Mogami onryou had possessed. Naoe's <<choubuku >> had exorcised them all in a single blow.

Tears slid down Kojirou's cheeks as he looked down at them dazedly.

"Kojirou-dono..."

He did not turn even at the sound of Naoe's voice. Naoe called to him once more and moved to lay a hand on his shoulder.

"!"

Kojirou slapped his hand away violently and whirled. Hatred smoldered in

his silent glare.

"Kojirou-dono. Come with me to [Sendai](#) , to your brother."

"..."

"Kojirou-dono."

Kojirou looked down silently. His shoulders trembled—because of rage?

"..."

Resigned, Naoe stood and began to walk away. Only then did Kojirou open his mouth.

"Naoe-[uji](#) ."

"?"

Kojirou said, with his back to Naoe, "The '[kinrin no hou](#) ' "

can be countered by 'Gouzanzemyouou-hou' and 'Daiitokuou-hou'. The dual

casting of these spells will surely grant thee victory."

"The dual spells of [Gouzanze](#) and [Daiitoku](#) ..."

"I would ask thee to speak to my brother. To tell him of my mother and myself—"

Naoe nodded quietly.

"... I will."

The young man trembled.

Looking over his shoulder at Kojiro on his knees beside the woman whose body had been host to Ohigashi, Naoe left the garden.

Dawn approached.

Naoe scowled at the eastern sky, the stern austerity returning to his face.

(Kagetora-sama...!)

Chapter 3: The Storming City

Leaden clouds pressed down from the sky.

A woman lingered in the rain, surveying the hazy ruins at the site of the [Northeast University Hospital](#) cave-in.

She looked odd.

Up close, she gave off a bizarre aura.

It was noticeable at once: the woman watchfully brought her left fist up to her mouth and touched it with her tongue, as if she were a demon tasting human blood. This was the [mudra](#) of [Dakiniten](#) .

"[Naamaku sanmanda bodanan kiriku kaku sowaka](#) —..."

The air shifted ominously around her. A moment later, a pale phosphorus light surrounded her.

"[Naamaku sanmanda bodanan kiriku kaku sowaka](#) . Naamaku sanmanda..."

The light took on the shape of beasts. —Koko, the fox spirits of [Dakini](#) , began to dance in midair.

"[On dakini saharakyatei sowaka](#) ".

The [koko](#) swirled around the 'person with the bizarre aura'. At their center was a small [wooden doll](#) —the [koppashin](#) .

"Attack! You foxes!"

The **koko** instantly growled with teeth bared and struck at the **koppashin** .
However—

Gyyyaaaan!

The foxes were swept away and fell writhing to the ground. The woman, **Mogami Yoshiyasu** , stared intently at the **koppashin** , which seemed to quiver—then the flickering image of a wrathful, ruthless god appeared in the air above it.

"Tis—!"

The image of a grotesque body with bristling hair, white skin, three eyes and six arms, entwined by a snake. That snarling, fearsome visage belonged to a wrathful Buddhist demon-god.

Shoumen Kongou !

"Whose deed was this...!" Yoshiyasu groaned to herself, clicking her tongue. "Thought they that this manner of conjuration would stop us...?!"

She joined her hands in a ritual gesture once more to rouse the **koko** .

"**On dakini saharakyatei sowaka** ".

The **koko** , pregnant with murderous intent, surrounded **Shoumen Kongou** . The fierce god's three eyes glinted.

"**On dakini saharakyatei sowaka !** —Expel him, you foxes!" she roared. The **koko** attacked the wrathful god. **Shoumen Kongou** swung his six arms threateningly and crushed one after another of the

foxes who came at him with teeth bared, or cut them apart with his sword, or smashed them to the ground. A fierce battle began.

"On dakini saharakyatei sowaka !"

Yoshiyasu sent forth more and more of the fox spirits. Countless numbers assailed Shoumen Kongou without pause. But the god warding them off right and left with his six

arms. The fearsome, raging god roared thunderously at the madly-dancing

foxes baring their slaving teeth at their unreachable prey and filling the air around him with their wriggling evil aura.

Crunch.

Shoumen Kongou 's teeth pulverized pale white fire.

(Thou...whose work is this...!)

Yoshiyasu clenched her teeth. She was going around in circles in a contest with someone of equal power. Both of their spiritual powers were manifestly "demon" powers.

"On kiri kaku un sowaka —...!"

Yoshiyasu concentrated all her power. The number of koko doubled and began to overwhelm Shoumen Kongou . Rather than decreasing as they were smashed apart, the swarm of koko swelled to the hundreds, the thousands.

"On kiri kaku un sowaka , on kiri kaku un sowaka —!"

The *koko* nipped at *Shoumen Kongou* . Though he shook them off, the overwhelming concentration of the skulk of foxes showed no signs of decreasing. The rampaging *Shoumen Kongou* howled in pain. Yoshiyasu's power was truly on another level.

"Destroy him! You foxes!"

At Yoshiyasu's shout the foxes sank their fangs into the demon-god's body. *Shoumen Kongou* gave a horrible howl as they tore out his three eyes.

Gwaaaaaaaah—!

It only stopped when the foxes ripped his heart apart. The image of *Shoumen Kongou* wavered.

(Yes...!)

Crack.

A fissure appeared in the wooden figure, and it split in half with a howl.

Shoumen Kongou had been annihilated.

The *koko* floated into the air, glowing with phosphorous light. A smile of triumph appeared on Yoshiyasu's thin cheeks.

"How dare they belittle us, to think that such power could defeat us? What impertinence."

Another presence moved behind her.

"Aren't you the one who's belittling us?"

"I"

She spun sharply. Across the rubble—

How long had they been there? A man and a woman loitered in the rain.

"Hmph, so I see. As I anticipated, an opponent with some nerve."

"! ...Who are you?" Yoshiyasu went instantly on guard.

Chiaki Shuuhei—Yasuda Nagahide stared at Yoshiyasu coolly.

"Rather cowardly of you to possess a woman, isn't it, Lordling? If you glare at me like that, it might move me to show you some mercy," Chiaki said, taking no heed of Yoshiyasu's hostile anger. "Is it to borrow your vessel's <<power>>? Your tastes really turn me off."

"Oh, and what's wrong with it?" Kadowaki Ayako—Kakizaki Haruie —cut him off. "Us women don't need to go easy on each other."

"... Stop that, you're scaring me."

"What? People of the same sex don't need to hold back, right?" Ayako turned to Yoshiyasu, deadly serious. "I'm going to give it all I've got today, so be prepared."

"Thou..." Yoshiyasu gritted out. "Thou art—Uesugi's Yasha-shuu ."

"Hmm. I'm honored to be recognized," Chiaki smirked. "We're here to exterminate the foxes released in Sendai along with their master by Lord Kagetora's command. It'll serve as revenge for the priest and his wife, too."

"Revenge...?! Thou can't...thou can't mean that Kagetora is still alive...!"

"He asked us to give you his regards—" a violent "energy" sprung up from Chiaki's body. "—and apologies for not killing you himself!"

"!"

Chiaki shot a <<nenpa >>

at Yoshiyasu, who ducked and erected a <<wall>>. "Thou...!"

Yoshiyasu yelled as she braced against the gust of the blast.

She formed Dakiniten 's mudra .

"On dakini saharakyatei sowaka !"

The koko revived. What raging auras!

"Tear them apart, you foxes!"

"Haruie, now!"

"OK!"

Ayako shot out her will in all directions. The koko screamed and veered.

"Thou...!"

Yoshiyasu struck at Ayako with <<nenpa >>. But it broke apart on Chiaki's <<wall>> just before it could reach her.

"Thou impudent...!"

Dakini mantra! The koko multiplied right before their eyes and charged without giving them time for breath.

"Ugh!"

One grazed against Chiaki's face and sent his glasses flying.

"Bastard!"

"Nagahide! There're too many of them! We can't take them all at once with <<kouhou-choubuku >>!" Ayako yelled as she struck back against the onslaught.

"<<Ressa-choubuku >>, then!"

They formed the ritual gesture simultaneously.

"Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !"

The koko attacked from behind en-mass.

"bai!"

Shuyrp!

The whirlwind released by their incantation swallowed the koko up with a scattering of flames. But they were only exorcising the
spirit foxes at random, and until Yoshiyasu's power was exhausted...!

"Thou...!"

Yoshiyasu was determined to win. She continued to call the koko unyieldingly. Chiaki and Ayako performed the next exorcism and the next in exquisite harmony without pausing for breath.

"bai!"

"bai!"

Fatigue lined Yoshiyasu's face. The number of **koko** appearing gradually decreased. But Yoshiyasu continued the attack even

as her breath came in gasps and the sweat stood out in round droplets on her face.

"**On kiri kaku un sowaka , on kiri kaku un sowaka** —..."

"What's wrong, Lordling?" Chiaki provoked Yoshiyasu fearlessly. "Are you done already?"

"Wretched...!"

Yoshiyasu's <<**nenpa**>> surged towards them! Ayako blocked it with a <<wall>> as Chiaki shouted, "bai!"

"Guh!" Yoshiyasu moaned as she froze in place. Chiaki had placed a <<**gebaku**>> on her. Ayako finished off the **koko** still attacking them and cried, "Now, Nagahide!"

"**Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka !**"

Chiaki proclaimed loudly, "**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten !** For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

Yoshiyasu struggled wildly, but she could not break out of Chiaki's <<**gebaku**>>. An intense light gathered into Chiaki's fist.

But as he was on the verge of proclaiming the words of judgment—

At that critical point—

An awesome shock crashed into Chiaki and Ayako!

"Uwaagh!"

They flew through the air and hit the ground rolling. The <<gebaku >> on Yoshiyasu shattered.

"Wh...at...!"

A white shadow flickered into Chiaki's field of vision as he lifted himself off the ground with a moan. The shadow gazed at Chiaki and Ayako with a cool smile.

"I am your opponent."

"!"

Both Chiaki and Ayako gasped in surprise.

"Kousaka...!"

The beautiful young man smiled charmingly. —Kousaka Danjou Nosuke Masanobu stood there, clad in energy shimmering like a heat haze around him.

"Let me be alone," Takaya had said, and Yuzuru could do nothing but leave the room.

He'd thought that Takaya might be depressed, but that wasn't the case.

Takaya had made the recovery of Kagetora's <<power>> his

top priority, and was even now attempting to restore that <<power>> using the meditation technique taught to him by Kokuryou. Considerable concentration was required to seriously attempt it.

—He would be distracted if anyone were there.

Though he had not said as much, Yuzuru understood. He had quietly obeyed and left the room, but could not bring himself to leave Takaya behind and go off somewhere on his own.

Yuzuru sat down in front of the door with his arms around his knees.

(Uesugi Kagetora —...)

They'd said that that was Takaya's true name. Yuzuru had heard everything from Chiaki.

He couldn't accept everything just like that. Anyone else would probably have laughed off something so foolish. But Yuzuru had actually seen their <<power>> with his own eyes. And when he thought back over their baffling actions, he could fit more and more of what Chiaki had said into the picture.

(Why...)

Yuzuru thought of his best friend, alone in the room behind him.

(Why did it have to be Takaya?)

Yuzuru had—not yet been told what Kousaka had said about him. Though

he

wasn't sure why Chiaki had made him swear to help them, he was thankful

that he could be with his friend.

An amnesiac [Uesugi Kagetora](#) . Even if that were Takaya's true self—

(I'm your friend, Takaya.) Yuzuru closed his eyes almost in prayer. (It's okay for me to be with you, right?)

Sensing a step on the carpet, Yuzuru raised his head in surprise. Next to the elevator. Standing there was a tall man in a black suit who had evidently just alighted, a man whose face he knew. Yuzuru shouted instinctively, "Naoe-san!"

"Yuzuru-san... Why are you here...?"

Yuzuru dashed over and clung to the astonished Naoe.

"I'm so glad you're safe! Everyone was so worried—"

"Did Chiaki Shuuhei bring you here?"

"Yeah. We arrived in [Sendai](#) last night. But—"

Naoe looked towards the room.

"I've heard about Kokuryou-san. So Takaya-san is all right? Is he here?"

"Yeah. But..."

Looking at Yuzuru's forlorn downcast eyes, Naoe asked calmly, "...

Yuzuru-san, can you tell me in detail about the current situation in Sendai?"

"Yeah," Yuzuru nodded, and told Naoe as much as he knew about the particulars of the situation.

After listening to the story—

Naoe scowled and tsked lightly. "Looks like I'm way behind. I didn't realize that the power of the 'kinrin no hou' has already manifested to such an extent—"

"Chiaki and Ayako-san are at the site right now. They said that they were going to exorcise the curse-caster..."

"I see. ...That aside, Yuzuru-san. Are you all right? We're within the hypnotic barrier here."

"Well, actually," Yuzuru said, and rolled up the left sleeve of his parka to reveal the <<talisman bracelet>> Naoe had given him as protection against Shingen around his wrist. "Chiaki gave me this. He said that as long as I don't take it off, I won't be affected by Mogami's curse. Thanks to this, I haven't felt either spiritually or physically ill."

This bracelet seemed to resonate well with Yuzuru. He could pretty much put his mind at rest if Nagahide had given it to him.

(The problem is Kagetora-sama...)

Naoe looked at the door again. Next to him, Yuzuru said, "Takaya is meditating. He's seriously attempting to regain his powers."

Naoe started. "He's...using meditation?"

Apprehension shot through Naoe at Yuzuru's nod. Meditation implied pulling in the deepest parts of oneself. Drawing near one's true self.

Unclenching one sweaty fist, Naoe turned the knob, opened the door, and soundlessly entered the room.

Takaya sat in lotus position at the center of the traditional ten-tatami Japanese-style room.

He was no longer aware of presences or faint sounds. He had already entered into deep meditation. One could see to what extent he had focused his entire self inward by the rippleless tension surrounding him.

But his meditation was by no means tranquil. Two hours had already passed since he started. But the deep levels of his consciousness violently rejected the penetration of 'Takaya'. This was the wall of suggestion Kagehora had built around himself. The wall was so strong that it would not allow 'Takaya' to take even a single step towards 'Kagehora'. But it could not drive Takaya away so easily this time. Takaya had commenced a savage battle against himself within himself.

If he did not break down that wall, he would not be able to draw near Kagehora. He would not be able to obtain that <<power>>.

Takaya knew this instinctively. That was why he had staked the whole of his soul on the breaking of that wall.

Naoe could not move.

(... Kagetora-sama.)

Anguish was faintly visible on Takaya's face. There was no mistaking it for anything but pain. He was fighting against himself. The unyielding wall that Kagetora, strongest of the *Yasha-shuu*, had built to seal himself away could not be an easy thing to break. But Takaya had no choice.

Naoe trembled as fear immediately assailed him. Takaya was on the verge of remembering. He was about to turn into 'Kagetora' once more. Takaya would recapture the memories of the tragic past. He was about to break through the wall.

"You alone I shall never forgive—"

The blood drained out of Naoe's face.

"I shall never forgive for all of eter—...!"

"Kagetora-sama!" he shouted, shaking off those memories.

Yuzuru started.

He dashed over mindlessly, clutched at Takaya and shook his shoulders violently.

"Kagetora-sama! Please stop! Please stop this, Kagetora-sama!"

"Naoe-san! What's wrong, Naoe-san!"

"Kagetora-sama! Kagetora-sama!"

Takaya finally opened his eyes to Naoe standing in front of him, shouting wildly and shaking him. He looked slightly dazedly at him and said vaguely, "... Naoe."

"Kagetora-sama..."

Naoe was somewhat relieved. Takaya's eyes opened wide.

"Naoe. Is it...you?"

"Kagetora-sama."

"Why, Naoe! Tell me! Why did Kagetora seal his memories! What is that wall!" Takaya shouted, clutching hard at Naoe's clothes. "I couldn't tear it down...I couldn't break it no matter what I did! I couldn't get in any further! Why. Why couldn't I do it! Why are the memories sealed so tightly?!"

"Kagetora-sama..."

"What did you do to Kagetora?!"

"!"

Takaya's words pierced Naoe's heart and left him speechless.

Takaya's direct gaze begged him for an answer.

In that moment, Naoe recognized the depth of his own sins. Takaya, the Kagetora who could be happy because of the loss of all his memories, now had to take up those painful memories once more. And perhaps this

time, even more than before...

Whose fault was it?

Kagetora's pain.

Just *who* had caused it!

"Nao...!"

He pulled Takaya towards him wordlessly.

Held him tightly without answering.

He could do nothing else.

"Kousaka, you bastard. Why...!" Chiaki groaned.

Kousaka gazed at him coldly. "Well now, Yasuda-dono, Kakizaki-dono. How unexpected it is to meet you here."

"What is the meaning of this, [Kousaka Danjou](#) ?"

"Now, really. What meaning is there to be had? I unexpectedly happened upon a scuffle between foxes and [Yasha](#) . I simply couldn't let it pass."

Chiaki and Ayako shot Kousaka a chilling glare.

"But I really cannot stomach allowing this elegant fox-summoner to be your opponent. Hear me well, Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) . I, and no other, will be the one to bring you down. I must be the one to end your lives...!"

"!"

Wind swirled at their feet. With a howl, a violent gale attacked Chiaki and Ayako. Something sharp as knives grazed against their bodies.

"...!"

Sharp pain burned across their limbs. Countless cuts appeared on arms raised in protection.

—A razor whirlwind !



"...You bastard! That's tasteless as hell!"

"Nagahide! Over here!"

Turning, he saw palely flaming koko about to surround the two of them.

Yoshiyasu continued to chant her mantra demonically.

"Is she a monster? That asshole!"

"It's coming!"

The air around them roared ominously, and the **koko** attacked a third time. In a flash Kousaka shouted, "Here I come!"

Ayako promptly formed a **mudra** and sketched a <<**goshinha**>> around Chiaki. The knives of empty air slashed apart the net of will. Chiaki tsked.

"That won't defend against them!"

Chiaki directed his will. A large mass of concrete behind Kousaka, perhaps a ton or more, shivered and broke apart with a bang. The pieces hurtled towards Kousaka.

"!"

Kousaka turned to protect himself with a <<wall>>, shouting, "You...!"

The **razor whirlwind** that he summoned struck against the chunks of concrete Chiaki had

pulled from the ruins and broke them apart one after another. Kousaka gathered <<**nenpa**>> into the palm of his hand.

"Perish, **Yasha-shuu** !"

"Back at you!"

Chiaki did likewise. They attacked simultaneously!

There was a terrible crash as their powers collided in a gigantic explosion.

"Ugh!"

"Nagahide!"

Ayako shielded the nettled Chiaki. But the **koko** drew near her from behind. Chiaki formed the ritual gesture.

"bai!"

The foxes scattered. Kousaka followed up immediately with an attack from the **razor whirlwind**. Ayako ducked and struck at Kousaka with her <<**nenpa**>>.

"**On kiri kaku un sowaka** , **on kiri kaku un sowaka** —..."

The **koko** seethed out of the night endlessly. Yoshiyasu's power was stronger than they had anticipated.

"bai!"

Chiaki performed a steady stream of exorcisms, but it had become a contest of stamina. <<**Choubuku**>> consumed too much physical strength. If they didn't destroy the spell-caster, they were at a disadvantage.

"Think I'm gonna let you do that?!"

Even when he bound Yoshiyasu with a <<**gebaku**>>, the **koko** still attacked fiercely, and he had no opportunity to gather his power. Ayako had her hands full with Kousaka.

"What are you doing, siding with Mogami!"

Furiously counterattacking, Kousaka retorted, "Side with them? Hah. I simply want to defeat you."

"You depraved...!"

An explosion rocked the space between them. Their <<powers>> were on even keel going flat-out. No, Kousaka appeared to have the edge. He battled animatedly with a faint smile on his face.

However—

Kousaka's concentration suddenly went astray as if something had distracted him for a second. Ayako did not let that tiny opportunity go by.

"Take that!"

"!"

Kousaka took the <<nenpa >> in the teeth and went flying. He had just barely caught it with a <<wall>>, but it had not protected him from the shock. He glared with all his might at Ayako as she prepared to throw the finishing blow. A plasmatic light flashed.

"Kyaaaah!"

In the moment Ayako flinched, shielding her face, Kousaka made his preparations.

"Hmm, so you've finally realized."

"? About what!"

"Reinforcements have arrived. You can exterminate the foxes to your heart's content later."

"Eh?—"

"Tell Kagetora that the fox-summoner is the game you're after. If you want to take the enemy, destroy the summoner."

"Wh...! Kousaka!"

They suddenly heard the sound of a great number of people behind them. At the same time, the foxes screamed shrilly.

Yoshiyasu and Chiaki turned. Armored warriors ran towards them with swords swinging, cutting down one after another of the foxes. Yoshiyasu exclaimed in terror and astonishment, "What...!"

At the head of the group, a man around thirty shouted, "**Onryou** of Mogami! Thou shalt not escape this day!"

"! ...The Date?!"

The leader of the advancing warriors was **Katakura Kojuurou Kagetsuna** , vassal of the Date Clan.

(Thou wretches, at a time like this...!)

Yoshiyasu clicked her tongue in disgust and drove the failing foxes forward

"**On kiri kaku un sowaka** , **on kiri kaku un sowaka** —..."

Kousaka, her vital support, was nowhere to be seen. He had apparently judged it to be a hard fight and already taken off. Yoshiyasu had no strength left with which to deal with the reinforcements of skeletal warriors.

For a moment Chiaki had been uncertain about which side the warriors would join, but made his determination as they plowed into the foxes. "I dunno what this is about, but this is the end!"

"Thou...do not presume too much!" she cried, and no sooner said than a sharp light flashed from all the [koko](#) at the same time.

"!"

The spirit foxes released all of their energy in one intense burst. The light enveloped everything nearby, and Chiaki involuntarily covered his eyes.

"Ugh...!"

<<You wretches, I will remember this! You cursed Date!>>

What might have been Yoshiyasu's voice echoed back to them, and the light immediately disappeared. The darkness returned once more.

"...?"

When he finally half-opened his eyes, he saw the crumpled form of the woman who had been Yoshiyasu until moments earlier on the ground. Yoshiyasu had apparently abandoned his spiritual vessel and escaped.

All the **koko** had already disappeared.

"Feh! So we missed our opportunity?" he spat regretfully, and turned to the warriors rushing up to him. Kojuurou walked towards him.

"Art thou well?"

"Your assistance was unexpected. Are you an **onshou** of the Date?"

"I am **Katakura Kagetsuna** , a vassal of the Date Clan. 'Tis plain that thou art Uesugi's **Yasha-shuu** ."

"Huh, looks like we're pretty famous," Chiaki responded, finally smiling. "I'm **Yasuda Nagahide** . This is **Kakizaki Haruie** . For now, let me just say thanks. ...We were too short-sighted. We never thought that Kousaka would be with the Mogami."

"Kousaka? What! **Kousaka Danjou** ?"

Chiaki tilted his head questioningly when he saw Kojuurou's face change color. "You know him?"

Kojuurou was so astonished that for a moment he was speechless.
Ayako's

head lifted as she recalled Takaya mentioning that Date had been in contact with Kousaka.

"What did Kousaka say to Date? What is Takeda scheming?"

Kojuurou said stiffly but calmly, "On that matter doth my master

Masamune wish to devise a meeting. May I ask of you to convey this message to your master, Lord **Uesugi Kagetora** ?

"Eh...?"

Chapter 4: Flowing Stars

"He wants to speak to me? Masamune?"

Chiaki and Ayako had told him upon their return to the hotel. His gaze suddenly fell to the bandage around his right hand given him by Masamune and his household.

"To Uesugi Kagetora . That's what he said?"

"They pretty much know all about us. Though that's only to be expected if they were in contact with Kousaka," Chiaki commented. "I don't get that guy. Kousaka, that bastard. Didn't he say he was here to negotiate an alliance for Takeda with Date against Mogami? Then why was he helping Mogami?"

"Just because he thought he could finish us off?"

"Then why did he save Kagetora?"

Naoe, who had been listening quietly, opened his mouth to speak. "I wonder if there's some sort of benefit for him in attaching himself to Mogami. If Takeda really wants to destroy Mogami, they probably wouldn't take an alliance with Date so lightly."

"But Takeda might also be considering joining with Mogami to bring down Date."

"No—" Naoe shook his head. "That's almost certainly not the case. If

they joined with Mogami, then Mogami would immediately learn about the hostilities in [Echigo](#) . I don't think Takeda would go so far to destroy Date. Just, maybe Kousaka sought to gain something by making a deal with [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) personally...

Ayako made a face. "Whatever for? Maybe Kousaka's going along with Mogami's transfer of the capital plan or something."

"Well, who knows?"

Chiaki unfolded his arms in disgust. "It's like that guy's just playing around, doing whatever he wants... But Mogami's not doing too bad either, huh? All this transfer of the capital crap? Can it be accomplished that easily by a hypnotic suggestion?"

"But he sounded pretty serious about the transfer of the capital, didn't he?" Yuzuru entered the conversation. "The capital is filled to bursting, and the problem is no longer on a scope that Tokyo can resolve by itself—it has to involve the entire island chain. But even if something's started now, I can't see it finishing within twenty or thirty years."

"That's true. The complexity of this country as it is now really cannot be dealt with using [Sengoku-Era](#) sentiments."

"Humph. If the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >> [onshou](#) have any idea how to solve the awful mess of today's national problems,

then let's let them, those fucking morons," Chiaki swore, and returned Takaya's gaze. "Anyway, Kagekora. What're you going to do about Masamune?"

"...Hmm, that's true." Takaya returned expressionlessly. "In any case, we have to dissolve the curse on [Sendai](#) . The joint spells we need to neutralize this 'kinrin no hou ' are 'Gouzanze Myouou-hou ' and 'Daiitoku Myouou-hou ', you said, right?"

"I think we can trust that information. Since it is true that either of these will neutralize [Dakiniten-hou](#) ."

"Can we—do it?"

Naoe closed his mouth. They could handle <<[choubukuryoku](#)>>, but they were not experts in curses.

"I wouldn't say that we can't do it, but we would need to choose a place that is very spiritually advantageous."

"An advantageous...place?"

"Yes. The power of location is significant. A place with a strong, pure spiritual aura such as a holy site increases the power of spells cast there. If we're to break the curse barrier, we should do it where the effect is weakest."

Takaya murmured, "So, [Kyougamine](#) , then?"

Everyone turned to him. Takaya raised his eyes determinedly.

"We'll need Masamune's power, won't we?"

"Are you gonna accept his invitation, Kagetora?"

"I gotta go and have a look, right? And I think we can trust Masamune

and company more than that guy Kousaka." Takaya responded flatly to everyone present. "I'll go see Masamune tomorrow."

No one raised an objection.

"I want to talk to you," Yuzuru had said to Takaya, so the two of them had come up to the roof.

Night had fallen, and lights shone in the city. The tail-lights of cars flowed along main street. Takaya and Yuzuru leaned against the railing and gazed down at the scenery for a while without saying anything.

They had not spoken much since that morning; Takaya seemed to be avoiding it.

A car's horn blared distantly. Takaya finally opened his mouth to speak, still looking down on the hustle and bustle of what seemed almost like another world.

"What did you want to talk to me about?"

"..."

Yuzuru was silent for a moment, then said haltingly, "Uesugi Kagetora."

Takaya raised his head, blinking.

"That's your name, isn't it?"

"..."

"I've heard all about you guys. Uesugi Kagetora is your true name, right? He said that you're this person called Uesugi Kagetora ."

"Chiaki told you?"

Yuzuru's gaze fell to his feet.

For a moment he seemed to be steeling himself—then he turned to Takaya resolutely.

"You can't throw away yourself, Takaya!"

"Huh...?"

"Right now, you're planning to discard 'Ougi Takaya', aren't you?"

You're thinking that throwing yourself away won't matter if you can get that power, right? That it'll be fine. That it doesn't matter if you toss 'Ougi Takaya' away."

"Yuzuru..."

"I'm *not* going to let you do that!"

Yuzuru's tone was more forceful than usual.

"No matter what the reason, I'm not going to let you act so selfishly.

I'm not letting you! It's true that I don't have your power or your strength, but still... I'm not going to let you run away like that!"

Takaya looked at Yuzuru in surprise. Yuzuru was glaring fiercely at Takaya, hands clutched into fists.

"I'll never forgive you if you betray the people who treasure you now by doing that. There must be some other way you can get power!"

"Yuzuru—"

"We only have you. Miya-chan and your parents only have you. To us, there's not one good reason for 'Ougi Takaya' to disappear!"

Takaya was speechless. Yuzuru pleaded with him forthrightly, "There must be some way for you to accept 'Uesugi Kagetora' without losing 'Ougi Takaya'. Some way that won't hurt anyone. You have to find a way—"

It would take everything he had to find a way.

So that he would not need to betray anyone.

Takaya finally understood.

His seventeen years were probably next to worthless in comparison with Uesugi Kagetora's four hundred. 'Ougi Takaya' was one small person whose human value was far beneath that of 'Uesugi Kagetora'.

That was what he had thought in self-derision, and in that light throwing away 'Ougi Takaya' was the right thing to do for those who needed Kagetora. —If he could not have that power without doing so.

But that had never been true.

It was not necessary for him to throw himself away. There had to be another way. He did not have the right to betray anyone.

Yuzuru finally smiled his usual gentle smile.

"You can call me pesky and obstinate all you want, but I'm going to be following right behind you everywhere you go. I'm going to watch you so you don't take any stupid shortcuts." He smiled at Takaya unwaveringly. "I've already made up my mind, so be prepared."

"Yuzuru." Takaya looked slightly stunned, but it gradually became a heartfelt grin. "You're really obstinate," Takaya said, and extended his right hand. "Gimme your hand."

"Huh?"

"Just do it."

Yuzuru obediently placed his hand on Takaya's palm. Takaya quietly closed his eyes.

"Yuzuru. I'm gonna make you a promise."

"A promise?"

"I'm not gonna take the easy way out. I'm not gonna betray anyone.

...If I bitch about it..." The corners of Takaya's mouth curved up in a small smile. "You can knock me down with this hand."

"..."

Yuzuru also smiled.

"You'd probably just hit me back."

"I wouldn't do that."

"You never know."

Yuzuru grinned happily to see Takaya finally acting himself again.

But he was changing.

The seeds of change had already been planted.

Naoe gazed out at the two friends from the entrance to the staircase.

His eyes dropped slightly as a voice called to him from behind.

"Why don't you climb up instead of standing there so silently?"

A young man wearing a white coat was standing at the foot of the stairs.

It was Kousaka Danjou .

Naoe turned to him without any sign of surprise. Kousaka gave a low laugh and slowly ascended.

"Looks like Kagetora is in one piece?"

"He would not be so easily done in by some onshou ."

Kousaka came to stand next to Naoe and cast his gaze over at Takaya and Yuzuru.

"Humph, so you brought Narita Yuzuru?"

Naoe replied guardedly, "You were the one who told us not to take our eyes off him, Kousaka Danjou ."

Kousaka snorted. "True enough. He appears to be the only person who can draw out Kagetora's powers, huh?"

"Why don't you stop putting on airs and just tell me? The true nature of Narita Yuzuru. Who in the world is this young man that's supposed to be a 'threat to the Roku Dou Sekai'?"

Kousaka answered with a faint smile, "Instead of asking me, wouldn't it be faster to seek an answer from your master, Lord Uesugi Kenshin?"

"! What?!"

Looking at the color draining out of Naoe's face, Kousaka said, "On that score, Kagetora doesn't seem that far off from regaining his memories, hmm?"

Naoe's face stiffened slightly. As if feeling him out, Kousaka murmured, "Aah, but that's what's called reaping what you sow, hmm, Naoe? It's no good trying to wriggle your way out of it now. Since you slept with your master's lover, of all things... You've let the way of the retainer fall to the wayside."

Naoe held his breath. Kousaka continued mercilessly, "Well, Naoe? How did it feel to toss away even your honor to satisfy your desires? Did you want Minako that much? Did you hate Kagetora that much?"

"—That's not true...!"

"And really, you didn't have to do it at that scene of carnage. ...Ah, of course. In the Otate no Ran four hundred years ago, you were the

ringleader of those who drove

Kagetora to his death, were you not? The two of you started in mutual hatred, so I suppose that's the only place where you could end up."

"No!" Naoe raised his voice, glaring at Kousaka. "Mutual hatred...? I never hated him. I never hated him at all!"

"Then why did you steal Minako away from Kagetora? Did you want that woman so badly? So badly that you were willing to sever the bond between lord and retainer?"

"No...that's not true! I—!"

Kousaka cut Naoe off coldly, "You went so far that you flew right past tragedy into comedy—you rape Minako, then force Kagetora into her body

with *kanshou* , which is pregnant with your child."

"...!"

"I'm not going to let you make the excuse that you had no other choice in the assault from Oda, Naoe. Of all things, you *performed kanshou* "

for Kagetora on Minako's body. The body that you raped, that bore you child—Minako's body. Yes, it was precisely the same as having Kagetora

kill Minako. To drive the soul of your beloved out of her body in order to make that body yours and prolong your own life. Of course Kagetora was vehemently opposed to it. But with that abominable ability of yours, you overcame his objections. That abominable ability to perform kanshou for someone else!"

"..."

Naoe stood frozen, his eyes widening.

"You should be thankful that at least Kagetora didn't go mad. Kenshin may have bestowed it upon you, but what an arrogant <<power>> it is. You used it as a tool for your loves and hates. Did you hate those two so much? Did you hate Kagetora so much...?!"

"Shut up!" Naoe shouted, with so much pain that he might well have spat out blood along with those words.

The smile suddenly vanished from the corners of Kousaka's mouth.

He asked Naoe quietly as the other man wrestled with his anguish, "Did you hate Minako...?"

Naoe's eyes abruptly flew open.

"Did you hate Minako, who won Kagetora's love in those days of carnage?"

Minako, who eased Kagetora's hardened heart? ...Did you hate her?"

"..."

"Who was it you really held in your arms?"

The expression fled from Naoe's face.

The wind suddenly blew through the space between them.

Kousaka gazed at Naoe silently for a moment, then asked slowly, "Do you love him so much?"

"—"

"Was it with a heart twisted and maddened, in self-deception... Or..."

He received no reply.

For a moment he looked at Naoe with something like compassion.

Then he suddenly glanced away and focused on Takaya and Yuzuru.
Kousaka

gazed at the gentle light glowing from Takaya's body as he stood there with Yuzuru's hand in his.

The door would soon be closed—

"Date will probably offer their aid. You can use their strength to great advantage. Take the offer."

"... Does Takeda really want an alliance with Date? Is it true that you've joined with Mogami?"

Kousaka's laugh was a low rumble in his throat. "Who's joined with Mogami? Helping the Mogami lordling was just a little business deal."

"Business? What sort of business?"

"Naoe. Surely you've noticed it."

And Naoe turned.

"That Oda is behind Mogami. I don't think we should make light of the fact that Oda is the one pulling the strings from the shadows. Though that plan to transfer the capital does seem to be something the Mogam are plotting by themselves. Oda is likely unifying the onshou of the Northeast to fight against Takeda."

"So you're saying that you made a deal with Yoshiyasu in order to get information on Oda? You can't mean that the bargain was—"

Kousaka looked at Naoe coldly.

"Yes. It's exactly as you guessed."

Naoe's face abruptly stiffened. He seized Kousaka's collar violently.

"You bargained to deal with us? Were you the one who attacked Kagetora-sama...and Jikou Temple last night?!"

"Humph. I never supposed that it'd be enough to kill Kagetora. But it seems to have become impetus for Kagetora to regain his <<power>>."

"Damn you! Do you understand what you did? You involved the abbot and his wife! His wife died. Someone died" because of you!"

"Hot-tempered, aren't you, Naoe," Kousaka said with a faint, cruel smile. "Have you forgotten? We're onshou of the Sengoku. On that battlefield, did we ever hesitate to kill

anyone? What need do murderers have to pretend virtue at this late date?"

"Wh...!"

"You should think of it as a small unavoidable sacrifice for Kagetora's sake. With a minimum of sacrifices, Kagetora has gotten the message that he must regain his <<power>> as soon as he can."

Gnashing his teeth in anguish, Naoe thrust Kousaka violently away from him.

"... Date thinks you've betrayed them for Mogami. What will you do?"

"Give them proof of our innocence." Kousaka's expression was dismissive. "An alliance between Takeda and Date is necessary to counter Oda. Oda will probably one day be Date's enemy as well. Lord Masamune must know this quite clearly."

"..."

"Looks like tomorrow will be a tough day." Kousaka began descending the stairs with those parting words.

Naoe said to his back, "Kagetora-sama will...probably never forgive you, Kousaka."

Stopping, Kousaka turned to say over his shoulder, "Hmm, then I guess that makes two of us, Naoe."

Kousaka vanished down the stairs with that last shot. Naoe looked after him, then turned back to Takaya and Yuzuru. —To regain his <<power>>.

He bit his lip lightly.

(Kagetora-sama...)

"What. Thou wert hindered by Uesugi...!"

Mogami Yoshiaki raised his eyes sharply as he heard the report.

He was at a certain Japanese restaurant in Sendai . He had stopped in Sendai to check on the effectiveness of the curse barrier before heading for Tokyo, and called his son Yoshiyasu to him.

"And so thou shamelessly retreated?"

"__"

Yoshiyasu fell prostrate before his father. He had taken another spiritual vessel—a young man this time.

"Didst thou once again stand by uselessly, doing nothing about the Uesugi? I had thought that thou hadst dealt with them long ago! Thou worthless slave! Yet thou daarest name thyself son of the Hawk of Dewa?"

Yoshiyasu could make no reply. He only tensed slightly as he trembled.

"By all rights, the <<jike-kekkai >> on Sendai should have been completed long ago! And yet thou art here while it lies incomplete."

"But, Father...!"

"I shall not listen to thine excuses!" Yoshiaki interrupted flatly, and

Yoshiaki closed his mouth. "I was wrong to overestimate thy spiritual

powers. I had thought to wipe the slate clean of the strengths and weaknesses of thy past life and bestow upon thee one more chance to prove thy worth... I was wrong to ask this of thee. In truth, thou knows nothing of thy father's heart. Thou wretch!"

"__"

"How much disappointment must thou heap on thy father before thou art satisfied...!"

Yoshiyasu glared down at the [tatami](#) ,

not raising his eyes. His fists shook as he endured the humiliation.

His father gazed at him silently for a moment, then forcefully expelled a sigh.

"'Twould be cruel of me to ask yet more from thee. I can change not thy natural ability. There is no other way. If my second son [lechika](#) had but remained in this world..."

"...!"

Yoshiyasu's eyes widened, and he unthinkingly moved forward on his knees to shout, "Father! I shall not give thee further reason for care!

I, Yoshiyasu, will annihilate Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) without fail! I will complete the curse on [Sendai](#) tomorrow! So I beg of thee! I beg of thee, Father!"

Yoshiaki gazed at Yoshiyasu coldly. "Naturally."

"Father—"

"If thou canst not accomplish even this, then thou art not fit to bear the name of the son of Mogami. If thou dost understand this, then away from hence immediately. Until thou shouldst defeat Date and Uesugi, do not think to speak with me again."

Yoshiyasu raised his head in terror and looked at his father's face without meeting his eyes. His father raised his cup to his lips, indicating that he had nothing more to say.

Yoshiyasu bit his lip hard. His nails dug into the [tatami](#) as he silently swallowed against nauseating regret.

"...As you command."

It took everything he had.

Stepping out of the Japanese restaurant, Yoshiyasu turned back towards where his father Yoshiaki was likely even now drinking sake with the members of the prefectural Diet. —The words that Kousaka had once said to him flitted across the back of his head.

"Do you not think that, after being alienated and murdered, you're still just being used now that you've been resurrected?"

He wanted to believe that that was not true, but he bit his lip as he recalled his father's cold features. His fear of his father had not changed. When he stood in front of Yoshiaki, he was immobilized by it.

Regret transformed into irritation. Yoshiyasu blamed his father's rebuke on Kousaka.

(He might talk big, but 'tis almost as if he is not working to defeat them—...)

Though he had promised to deal with Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) , Kousaka had not killed even a single one of them. And Kagetora seemed to be still alive as well.

('Tis not my fault, but his.)

Yoshiyasu raised his eyes sharply.

(Thou—)

Now that it had come to this, he had to complete the barrier over [Sendai](#) .

Neither Mogami's rule of the country nor the transfer of the capital mattered to him. He only wanted to be recognized by the father who had disinherited him. He only wanted to triumph.

(I shall certainly kill the Uesugi.)

He clenched his fists tightly. His father's cold look was reflected in Yoshiyasu's fiercely glaring eyes.

(Father—)

The direction of the wind seemed about to change.

People began to stir.

The papers the following morning announced the approval of the 'Proposal for Transfer of the Capital' by the prefectural assembly. Its passage two days after its submission was of unprecedented speed. The 'Transfer of the Capital' plan was splashed across all the headlines, and it made for big television news as well.

Mogami Yoshiaki and his cronies had apparently roused the mass media.

Scowling peripherally at all of this, Takaya and company set out to the meeting with Masamune.

Chiaki drove Naoe and Takaya in his Leopard, and they alighted in front of the front door of Date's mansion.

A line of Date's vassals were already waiting at the entrance, and one among them, Katakura Kagetsuna, guided them inside.

As he walked along, Takaya half-turned as if suddenly realizing something. Naoe, following after him, asked, "What is it?"

"Eh? Ah, nothing—"

Takaya looked at Naoe with fresh eyes as a memory of Masamune and Kojuurou, master and retainer, surfaced in his mind.

"I was just thinking that you're with me today."

Naoe smiled quietly. "Even if anything should happen, I will not allow anyone to lay a finger on you. So set your mind at ease and do what you came here to do."

Takaya nodded, his tense expression easing, and said as he turned, "You don't have to tell me. I'll do it anyway."

"Here," Kojuurou said, kneeling in front of a paper sliding door. "Dono. Uesugi-dono is here."

Kojuurou slid open the door at his lord's response. All of the Date chief vassals were seated within.

Sitting directly in front of them was a one-eyed young man.

"I am glad that thou hast come, Uesugi-dono."

Takaya glared at Masamune, his eyes razor-sharp.

The [shishi odoshi](#) clacked.

"Let's dispense with the long greetings, Lord Masamune. I came here today as [Uesugi Kagetora](#) to meet with you. Let's get straight to what you want to say to me."

Takaya was almost arrogantly calm before the One-Eyed Dragon. Since Masamune already knew the truth about him, there was nothing more to fear.

Masamune grinned.

"So this left eye of mine was not mistaken. When it meets eyes such as thine, my warrior's blood is unwittingly stirred."

"I'm honored. But anyhow, have you noticed? Sendai's brainwashing is

finally starting in earnest."

"... About that—" and Masamune gravely began to tell the Date the information they had gathered so far. They had of course noticed the <<jike-kekka>>.

They also spoke of the 'fox-user woman' and of the times they had scuffled. At around two last night, they had skirmished with Mogami Yoshiyasu at the spot slated to be the southeast barrier point, the Northeast

Bullet Train overpass, and they spoke of how they had forced her to retreat.

"Uesugi-dono. Dost thou know of Mogami's plans? What follows the brainwashing of Sendai ?"

Takaya looked at Naoe behind him, who had thus far remained silent.

"About that, I think it'll be better to let the person who actually heard it from Mogami Yoshiaki himself tell you."

"What? Heard it from mine uncle?"

Pressed by Takaya, Naoe opened his mouth to speak.

"I am Naoe Nobutsuna ,

a retainer of the Uesugi Clan. Allow me to explain," Naoe began, and revealed the particulars of Mogami's 'Transfer of the Capital Plan' to Masamune. Masamune and the others leaned forward attentively, but the color slowly drained out of their faces as they listened.

"Doth mine uncle...truly plan to take such a foolish course of..." Masamune

said disbelievingly.

Naoe continued, "Mogami Yoshiaki and Mogami Yoshiyasu appear to have already begun using 'kinrin no hou '

to manipulate the mass media. Even before that, he used the power and connections of Diet Representative Ueshima, his spiritual vessel, to rouse influential people in the business and political worlds in Sendai as well as Tokyo. If the <<jike-kekka i>> is completed, all organizations will move towards transfer of the

capital starting from the individual level. In that case all power will doubtlessly be collected in the hands of one person: Diet Representative Ueshima—namely Mogami Yoshiaki ."



Takaya added, "These old men like Ueshima who're members of the Diet should refuse to become spiritual vessels, but he's still helping Mogami. Seriously, if this continues, this country will be under

Mogami's thumb. I'm not very good with words, so—"

Masamune crossed his arms firmly. "So 'tis Mogami's aim to become the 'Shogun' of this era? And build the Mogami Bakufu ?"

"Even if a 'transfer of the capital' is the right thing to do, Mogami's methods are high-handed and radical. Those who do not obey and those who interfere will be murdered by the koko one after another, and tyranny will be the result. If such a thing should actually happen, it will only result in social chaos. Though that is probably Mogami's goal—"

Takaya agreed, his voice hard, "In the end, they're still living in the Sengoku Era . And word is that the Mogami onryou will be migrating to Sendai soon. Of course, they're planning to wipe out the Date and make this their stronghold."

"... A general offensive, then?"

All the retainers present tensed. Masamune hummed for a moment with a hand on his chin.

"Dono. If Mogami hath formed a coalition with Ashina and other clans to encircle Date as Uesugi-dono hath said, they will inevitably move to attack Date at the same time," Kojuurou said, and Date Shigezane continued:

"... For now, if we could just escape Ashina's siege—"

"Negotiating with Ashina is impossible. Even if 'twere not so, their <<power>> is formed of malice towards the Date. They will

never consider a deal."

Masamune slowly murmured, "Takeda, then?"

All present turned their attention to Masamune. Masamune raised his eyes to return the gaze of his row of commanders.

"We will have Takeda draw Ashina away, then attack in a pincer movement. If we should accept Takeda's proposal, we will have fighting strength in one way or another."

"But, Dono—!" Unsurprisingly, Shigezane moved forward from his kneeling position. "Takeda—this man called Kousaka—may be in collusion with Mogami. We may be heading into a trap if we should take any unsound steps."

"On that score—" Naoe weighed in, and the attention of the Date turned to him—"you need not be so anxious. Takeda's intentions should be true. Better that you use the advancing Takeda."

"On what dost thou base thy conclusion?"

"Because the one he's in collusion with is [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#)."

Takaya turned to Naoe as if mesmerized. But Naoe continued, "Kousaka appears to have accepted a private deal with Yoshiyasu. Mogami was aware of our movements. So if Kousaka, who is himself [kanshousha](#), agreed to remove us from the picture—"

Takaya's expression tensed as he listened. He stared at Naoe's serene profile, eyes widening. It was Masamune who asked, "Then what did

Kousaka-dono and Yoshiyasu exchange, if 'twas not us?"

Naoe's eyes glinted.

"Perhaps—information on Oda."

"!"

Everyone drew in a startled breath.

"Information on...!" "Lord Oda Nobunaga ?" "Is Mogami by chance connected to Lord Nobunaga as well?!"

Naoe nodded firmly. The Date vassals visibly blanched. Directly in front of them, Masamune sat with his single eye staring intently at nothing, apparently at a loss for words.

The clack of the shishi odoshi clove through the frozen air.

The next words came from Takaya.

"Lord Masamune. You said that you wanted to protect Sendai .

We came here today because we trust you. We cannot surrender this city

to Mogami, to say nothing of handing it over to Nobunaga."

Masamune returned Uesugi Kagetora 's taut gaze. Takaya stated forthrightly, "We are asking you to lend the Uesugi your strength."

"..."

Masamune felt the impact of those words more absolutely than any hundred equivocal exchanges. By all rights, they should have come from

the Date.

An awakening tiger sat right in front of him with its teeth concealed.
Masamune smiled softly against the swelling tension.

His voice was anything but soft.

"You shall have it."

Chapter 5: Awakening of the Yasha

The sun began to sink towards the west.

A flurry of activity had descended on [Kyougamine](#) , the burial place of the Date family. The vassals and stewards of the clan moved back and forth in front of the [Zuihouden](#) , finishing construction of the [goma platforms](#) in preparation for the ceremony.

"Huh, so they're using a triangular ritual platform," Chiaki remarked, looking at the two platforms being readied in front of him. "The '[fire-wheel platform](#)'

of exorcism rituals. The same 'exorcism', but on a major scale, huh? —Though it originally meant something a bit different," Chiaki muttered, and turned to Takaya. "Kagetora. I think it's about time we got ready, too. You okay?"

Takaya was seated, rewrapping the bandage around his right hand. He seemed quite calm.

"Okay?"

"I'm asking if you can use your <<power>>."

"...Yeah," he responded, rising. "Well, guess we won't know until the time comes, but I somehow feel like I'm taking back my body."

"You're pretty calm."

The corners of Takaya's mouth turned up in a smile.

"Is that how I look?"

"Kagetora-sama."

Naoe came towards them, accompanied by Masamune. Two monks followed behind them.

"Kagetora-sama. Here are the honorable priests who will be conducting the ceremonies."

Masamune followed with an introduction: "This is Choukai-dono, a [Shugen Houin](#) priest from [Mount Haguro](#) ; likewise Keishun-dono. They both have ties to the Date."

After exchanging greetings, Takaya asked, "I've heard that '[Rendan-hou](#) ' means performing two rituals at the same time, but can it really get rid of the curse on [Sendai](#) ?"

The middle-aged monk, Choukai, answered Takaya's question. "'Tis quite true that '[Daiitoku](#) ' and '[Gouzanze](#) ' will effectively combat the curses of [Dakiniten](#) . But in the end, it hath much to do with the potency of the caster's spell. Though we will certainly give all that we can—"

There was no guarantee of success. If [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) 's spells were stronger, then they would not be able to break the '[kinrin no hou](#) '.

"But we won't necessarily come out on the losing end, either?"

"Quite right," said the somewhat younger [Shugen Houin](#) gravely. Ayako and Yuzuru joined them from the opposite side.

"Kagetora!" Ayako stopped next to Takaya and reported, "[Ashina Moriujii](#) is maneuvering in Tokyo. He's presented the 'Transfer of the Capital Plan' to the broad of directors of the party to start the debate. And

it looks like acceptance of the plan here in [Sendai City](#) will be a sure thing. They're seriously starting to move."

"Do you know what Mogami...what Diet Representative Ueshima is up to?"

"He's apparently been in [Sendai](#) since yesterday. He visited the prefectura office to meet with the

governor in the morning, and is supposed to make an appearance at the special general meeting of the finance association tomorrow, so he's probably still here."

"Kagetora-sama."

The corners of Takaya's mouth tightened slightly as he returned Naoe's gaze.

"It's a good bet, then? This is probably a good chance for us, huh?"

"The Date are hardening their defense on the barrier points, so I think we can seal [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) 's movements."

Yuzuru said beside him, "But Mogami's armored warriors will be making an appearance, so be careful."

"Got it. ...?"

Suddenly noticing the change in expression on the faces of Masamune and company, Takaya asked doubtfully, "What's wrong?"

"Uesugi-dono. This is...?"

"He's...my friend, Narita Yuzuru."

"Narita? He is not one of the [Yasha-shuu](#) ? I had heard that there were five..."

"I guess it may look that way, but he doesn't have anything to do with either the Uesugi or the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>>. He has strong spiritual senses, so he's been helping me out."

"He hath no connection to you? Yet—"

For a moment Naoe and Chiaki tensed. Masamune's sharp, perplexed single eye seemed to look through Yuzuru for an instant, but—

"...No, 'twas my imagination. Pardon me; 'tis naught of import," he said, and turned his head. As Takaya was about to poke his nose in further, Keishun, who also seemed to have sensed something from Yuzuru, interrupted him.

"Uesugi-dono. Might we not be allowed to take charge of him?"

"Huh?"

"This young sir. Judging by his appearance, he is no ordinary person, and indeed doth carry a great power concealed within him. With his aid, we may perhaps completely break through the '[Dakiniten-hou](#)'. Uesugi-dono, wilt thou not lend us this person's strength? We "'must"' borrow his power!"

Takaya looked at Yuzuru, pressed by the force of Keishun's appeal. Yuzuru only looked mystified.

"—so you say, but, Yuzuru."

"Yeah."

Yuzuru turned to Chiaki, then Naoe for their opinion with the air of someone quite at sea. —But both remained silent, looking grim. Yuzuru thought it over for a moment, then replied, "If I can be of help, then I'll work with you. No, please let me help."

"Truly?"

Both priests assured him that they were much heartened, their expressions instantly brightening. Takaya, looking worried, asked, "Yuzuru, will you be all right?"

"I don't know, but I don't want to sit around doing nothing and end up being a bother to Naoe-san and everyone else."

Takaya had to nod at that, but—did this mean that they had to use anyone with even a hint of power? He agreed reluctantly.

"Then we will begin the ceremony at sunset as we planned. Narita-dono will lend us his aid, and we will leave the tranquilization of the earth to ye."

"All right. Sunset it is."

"We will belike be entering battle from this point." Masamune's eye glinted solemnly. "Uesugi-dono, be thou prepared."

"Yeah," Takaya replied. Masamune nodded firmly at him. The three of them moved away towards the [goma platform](#) .

The goal of the [Yasha-shuu](#) would be to conduct the ceremony of earth-

tranquilization at the five

barrier points where the invocations of the dead had been performed.

The 'kinrin no hou '

fed upon the <<power>> of the spirits gathered by the

invocations. So if they could cut off its energy source, its effect would drop drastically, thereby making the neutralization that much easier. They would use earth-tranquilization to neutralize the

invocations of the dead and the power of Chiten to destroy the spell platform and purify the curse.

Naoe laid out their plan for confirmation:

"The earth-tranquilization will be accompanied by <<choubuku >>, so we'll move in two groups of two. Nagahide and Haruie will take the three points in the Miya and Teppou neighborhoods as well as Komegabukuro . Kagetora-sama and I will take Touhoku University and Aobayama Tunnel . Upon completion, return to Kyougamine and remain on standby; there will likely be an increase in activity from the Mogami onshou , so we will need to continue performing <<choubuku >> here. All right?"

Ayako complained, "Fine, but why do I have to go with Nagahide?"

"It's a question of distribution of power. You'll work most efficiently teamed with Nagahide."

"Wh-why?! With this guy!"

"Well, my deepest apologies for being this guy," Chiaki said with a straight face. He looked over at Takaya, who wore a rather fixed expression, probably from the tension. Chiaki slapped his cheek lightly with the back of his hand to call Takaya back to himself.

"What?!"

"We have great expectations of you, General-dono."

"Humph." Surprising calm, defiance gleamed in Takaya's eyes. "You don't have to tell me that."

Chiaki was going to be taking his Leopard to the sites. He handed Naoe a tiny Japanese wooden doll from the driver's seat.

"This is?"

"I'm giving this to you just to be sure. It calls Shoumen Kongou . It can't do <<choubuku >>, but can at least hold off malicious spirits. If Kagetora can't use his <<power>>, use this."

Naoe closed his hand over the koppashin and nodded. "...Right."

"But is it really all right to leave Narita here? Wouldn't it be better to have him on hand?"

"No. We'll doubtlessly be under intense attack while we're performing the earth-tranquilization rituals, and quite honestly we won't have the leisure to protect Yuzuru-san. Though he may have the bracelet, it's better not to exposed him to more danger. Kyougamine is sacred ground and we can trust the strength of the Date. If his power can be useful to them, it won't be wasted."

"... What burdensome baggage."

"Rather late to be saying that. I don't know how the curse neutralization's going to go, so don't let your guard down."

"All right already."

Ayako descended the stone stairs. She hurriedly got into the car and said to Naoe, "Preparations for the ritual are complete. They said that they'll begin soon."

"All right. We'll be heading out as well. Where is Kagetora-sama?"

"With Lord Masamune. I think he'll be here soon."

A bonfire blazed in front of the [Zuihouden](#) .

The Date's commanders, wearing uniforms whose crest matched the one on

the mausoleum, were stretched out along its perimeter. The [goma platforms](#) had already been prepared, and the ceremony could be started at any

moment. Their master Masamune, seated at their center, told Takaya,

"Now then. We shall leave the rest to ye."

"Yeah. And we'll leave things here to you."

"Takaya."

He looked at Yuzuru next to him. There was worry on his face. Takaya smiled comfortingly.

"I'll be fine. Don't worry 'bout me."

"Be careful. And don't do anything rash."

"Yeah. —Lord Masamune, please look after Yuzuru."

"Aye, of course."

Takaya turned on his heels. Naoe was waiting for him at the bottom of the flight of stone stairs.

The sun sank below the horizon.

Masamune watched Takaya as he disappeared down the path into the cedar

grove, then proclaimed loudly, "We now commence the ceremony for neutralization of the 'kinrin no hou'! Let us defend the Kyougamine barrier! Everyone, stand thy guard!"

"So the sun is fallen," a young man standing in a veranda which opened into a rock garden with a small pond murmured slowly. Another young man

within paused and turned at the sound of his voice. He was sitting in front of a Buddhist dais with a string of prayer beads in his hand in what appeared to be a small temple. The young man, who looked only twenty-five or twenty-six, was clad in the robes of a Buddhist priest and had a thick-browed, fearless face.

"Wouldst thou barter for more to the day?"

The young man in the veranda turned. It was Kousaka Danjou . "No. And you seem to like sitting in front of the Buddha, Yoshiyasu-dono."

"In my previous life, I set mine eyes on the path of a servant of the Buddha
But in the end I was not suited."

Kousaka looked at Yoshiyasu in his new vestments-clad spiritual vessel
maliciously. Yoshiyasu didn't bother to conceal his impatience at the
inference from Date and Uesugi preventing him from completing the
remaining barrier points. Though he had for the time being returned to
this temple in the Aoba Ward , which served as his base.

"Cunning Date. If you have not had enough, then I shall give you another
taste of the reach of Dakini 's koko ."

"Hoh, so you have some power remaining?"

"Thou—" Yoshiyasu flared up with unconcealed annoyance, "Thou hast not
dealt with Uesugi's Yasha-shuu at all! I gave thee information on Oda, did I
not? Yet it seemeth to me that thou hast done nothing to them!"

Kousaka looked outside, feigning ignorance. "I came to your aid, did I not?"

"Dost thou truly plan to move against Uesugi? Or dost thou simply intend to
break thy promise?"

"Put your mind at ease. I too lived in the Sengoku. I shall not break a
promise once made."

"Dost thou speak true? Dost thou truly intend to destroy the Uesugi?"

"You're exceedingly repetitive, Yoshiyasu," Kousaka retorted sharply,

crossing his arms and looking up at the sky. The western sky burned red. —The day had ended.

At that moment.

Yoshiyasu's sixth sense abruptly felt the 'aura' of [Sendai City](#) waver.

"Wh...!"

Accompanying the violent vacillation was a strong wave whose wavelengths resonated on a bizarre frequency. It roused a terrible feeling in Yoshiyasu.

"Wh...what was..." Yoshiyasu groaned, and Kousaka turned to him.

Yoshiyasu was shaking in agitation, a hand pressed against his head.

"What...is this...? What...what in the world...is this?!"

Kousaka's eyes narrowed slightly, his gaze directed suspiciously towards faraway [Kyougamine](#) .

(Looks like it's started.)

The corners of his lips turned up in a small smile.

(Now. Show me your conquest of the foxes, [Date Masamune](#) .)

'[Gouzanze Myouou-hou](#) ' and '[Daiitoku Myouou-hou](#) ' had begun at [Kyougamine](#) .

In the city of [Sendai](#) , a spell-battle of terrible proportions had commenced.

Chiaki's Leopard arrived at the first barrier point, the collapse site in Miya Town . Ayako climbed out and murmured, looking up at the south-western sky, "So the [Rendan-hou](#) 's begun."

"Would be nice if it went well, hmm? Anyway, let's get going here, too."

A gigantic pillar of light rose from the cave-in where the invocation of the dead had been performed as if to pierce the sky. It could not be seen by ordinary people. It was a pillar made of the enormous number of spirits drawn here.

"Hmm, looks like this is gonna be a challenge."

They stepped within the roped-off area.

"OK. I'll leave the <<[choubuku](#)>> to you, Nagahide."

"Yeah, yeah. All you ghostly gents, this is nothing personal."

A quiet shimmer rose from Chiaki's body.

As they gathered their <<power>>, the air around them shivered, warped by their aura. Ayako knelt on the ground. Chiaki formed the [mudra](#) of Bishamonten in front of his chest.

"All right! Here we go, Haruie!"

Two [goma](#) fires burned brightly within the [Kyougamine](#) grove. Choukai and Keishun each stood at a platform, and around them

some thirty monks were gathered. Choukai would conduct the 'Gouzanze Myouou-hou', Keishun the 'Daiitoku Myouou-hou'.

"On sonbanisonba un bazara un hatta on sonbanisonba un bazara un hatta —..."

"On shuchiri kyaro roha un kan sowaka on shuchiri kyaro roha un kan sowaka —..."

The monks chanted the two mantras in unison. Masamune and the other Date stood watching over them motionlessly. Nearby, Yuzuru silently looked on.

"On sonbanisonba un bazara un hatta —..."

"On shuchiri kyaro roha un kan sowaka —..."

A fathomless tension wove through the grove as the voices of the monks resounded in the darkness. The two oddly wavering fires danced in the air.

"Narita-dono..." Masamune called to Yuzuru, who stood frozen in place. Yuzuru's forehead was damp with sweat. His face, illuminated by the blazes, looked terribly pale.

"Narita-dono. How dost thou?"

"...Ah..." Yuzuru turned as he returned to himself. He answered, flustered, "Ah... No, I'm sorry...I..."

Masamune stared at him fixedly, his single eye wide. Within Yuzuru's body, a delicate change was taking place.

(What is...this?)

It was hard to breathe. His body was pulsating. Why? Was it because of the tension? No, this was something else.

The *goma fires* flickered. Purple flames.

"On sonbanisonba un bazara un hatta—..."

"*On shuchiri kyaro roha un kan sowaka* —..."

His throat was dry. Cold sweat gushed out of him.

(What's happening...?)

Woosh—his field of vision suddenly contracted. The twin fires burned painfully into his eyes. Flickering flames. The mantras swirled and coiled within his mind. Then—

(What...?!)

His body froze, seized by paralysis.

"Narita-dono?" Masamune asked, noticing.

He lost his balance, and his body crumbled heavily from his chair.

"! Narita-dono!"

Surprised, Masamune and the others held Yuzuru up. The pulsations were growing wilder and wilder. But Yuzuru could not move his numb body. His breaths came in painful gasps. Something was happening. The two

mantras

were wrecking havoc on Yuzuru's body: that was certain. But this was...!

"Narita-dono. Please hold on, Narita-dono!"

Yuzuru's body, hot as burning steel in his arms, startled Masamune. The two mantras appeared to be shaking to the surface something immense from the depths of his being.

(This is...!)

"It looks like the ceremonies at [Kyougamine](#) have begun."

Takaya and Naoe had arrived at their site. This was where Takaya and that woman who manipulated the foxes—Yoshiyasu—had tangled a few days

ago. It now looked completely different. Like the other barrier points, the spirits gathered by the invocation of the dead had created a gigantic pillar of light here.

"Is that thing all spirits? Pretty amazing, huh?"

"It is the might of the invocation of the dead. Our opponent is master of extremely strong spiritual powers."

Takaya closed his mouth abruptly. Naoe said inquiringly, "Kagetora-sama?"

"Naoe. You met Kousaka, didn't you?"

"Eh—?"

Takaya hesitated for a moment before continuing, "You said that Kousaka agreed to deal with us in exchange for information on Oda. Is that true? If it is, then...!"

Naoe wordlessly met Takaya's gaze as Takaya turned. There was no need for him to speak. His eyes did not deny it.

"... I see," Takaya said, biting his lip lightly. That night, the one who had attacked him—the one who had injured Kokuryou and caused the death of his wife was...

(That man—...)

Naoe looked at Takaya's fists closing tightly on his hatred. Then he turned towards the pillar of spirits towering from the 'platform', the sternness returning to his face.

"Let's begin. We don't have the leisure to stand around."

"Yeah."

Naoe caught sight of Takaya's eyes as he looked up—and gasped. Those eyes, sharp with resolve and authority— This was not the usual Takaya standing in front of him. His spoilt anger, the defiance that came from his immaturity, were nowhere in evidence. The will to fight, controlled by cool reason— This was without question an expression that could

belong only to a valiant general of the Sengoku .

(Kagetora-sama—)

Long-unfelt intoxication surged through him. Oh yes. This was Kagetora.

This was not the rebellious, immature youngster that he had to protect;

this was the one whose leadership they followed, on whom they gambled their lives: their only master, Sengoku general Uesugi Kagetora .

Takaya, too, could feel the immense <<power>> swelling

inside him. He, not Kagetora, felt it. This <<power>> that

he had unconsciously demonstrated in the battle with Shingen , with Ranmaru , without even knowing to whom it belonged—he no longer doubted belonged to himself. Not to 'Uesugi Kagetora '—him. Ougi Takaya no longer doubted.

This is 'my' power!

The power surged within him. The sense of completion filled every nook and cranny of his body. He understood. This was not the property of some fathomless stranger named Kagetora, but *his*. It was he, Ougi Takaya, who felt it now.

(I can do this!)

He would not cast away Ougi Takaya. As Ougi Takaya—he could fight with this incredible <<power>> as Ougi Takaya.

The surface of the pillar of light rippled slightly as if considering their auras. Naoe dropped to one knee and pushed his left hand against the ground. Takaya held out his right hand towards the pillar.

A flame-like aura surrounded both of them.

"Let's do it, Naoe!"

"At your command!"

As he spoke, Takaya gathered <<nenpa >> into the palm of his hand and shot it towards the pillar—the opening strike of the battle!

A portion of the pillar was blown away by Takaya's <<nenpa >>.

The pillar flew apart in all directions, and the spirits scattered into the air. They attacked Takaya and Naoe with immediate hostility. Naoe's <<goshinha >> stretched like a net over the two of them.

"Kagetora-sama, now!"

"On beishiramandaya sowaka , on beishiramandaya sowaka !" Takaya's eyes snapped wide. "Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten ! For this demon subjugation, confer thy demon-vanquishing sword upon me!"

A violent plasmatic light blazed through the air. Those spirits touched by the shock were sent flying, trailing screams. The light enveloped Takaya with a terrible thunderous roar.

"Ugh...!"

Light flashed from Takaya's fists, and a vast power settled into his arms. A mass of heated light took shape within Takaya's hands, still joined in the ritual gesture of Bishamonten . It stabilized in the blink of an eye and gained physical form.

The form was that of a sword: a genuine, superbly-forged katana whose

cold blade released pale tendrils of light. Takaya understood. This object in his hand—yes. It was something that he alone could use. This sword was conferred only upon the general of the Meikai Uesugi Army . He had without a doubt been given Bishamonten 's own power of <<choubuku >>.

(The Sword of Bishamonten ...!) Naoe stared with widened eyes. Takaya's <<power>> had now been completely resurrected.

"Here I come, onryou !"

Takaya shouted, brandishing the sword. Fussing over names was pure pretentiousness now. Whether Takaya had made himself 'Kagetora' or Kagetora had made himself 'Takaya'—in that instant.

The onryou attacked en-mass. Takaya swung the sword savagely. Ghosts disappeared

wherever the sword touched, swallowed up by its blade. The Sword of Bishamonten was a sword of exorcism; any spirit it cut into was sent to the next world.

"What are you doing, Naoe! Hurry up and start!" Takaya yelled. In response Naoe gathered 'energy' into his left hand and began the earth tranquilization.

"On sarabatataagyata hanna mannanau kyaromi —..."

What he now used was the original earth-tranquilization method created by the Uesugi based on the mantras of secret Buddhist teachings. He chanted each mantra in succession; his true objective of summoning Chiten took some time and considerable concentration. Consequently, the

devotee was (essentially) helpless against the physical world, and needed a master of defense who could watch his back.

"You...!"

The countless number of ghosts who had formed the pillar attacked simultaneously, giving Takaya no time for breath as he cut them down with the Sword. An extremely intense battle.



(Bastards!)

Takaya surrounded Naoe with a protective <<goshinha >>

while slashing the accursed ghosts apart. The ghosts disappeared wherever the Sword tore into them, but more ghostly soldiers stood behind him as he turned!

"bai!" he shouted, forming the ritual gesture with his left hand. The air rent

apart and sucked the spirit soldiers inside.

(Dual wielding...?!)

In the next moment, the rubble under his feet exploded, blasted apart by the onryou 's <<nenpa >>.

"!"

The onryou dancing in the air launched their <<nenpa >> at Takaya.

"Fuuuck!"

Takaya dashed away, pulling the attacks with him. He blocked the <<nenpa >> coming at him with a <<goshinha >>, and the next volley and the next shattered with violent blasts of plasmatic light on his shield.

"This how you wanna play?"

Roar.

The air at Takaya's feet warped and rumbled. Countless pieces of rubble, large and small, rose into the air.

"Take this!"

The rubble shot towards the onryou , eliciting countless hoarse screams. Takaya strengthened the <<goshinha >> around Naoe as they flinched away. Then he cut down the spirits pressing up against his back with the Sword of Bishamonten and scattered the spirits attacking Naoe with his <<nenpa >>.

Naoe continued to chant intently as his poured his <<power>> into the ground.

"Noumakusamanda bodanan harachibiei sowaka , noumakusamanda bodanan harachibiei sowaka —..."

He could feel power like an electric current flowing through his left hand where it pressed against the ground. The protector-deity of the earth was quickening. Chiten was awakening.

"Dammit!"

The onryou poured their <<nenpa >>

upon Takaya with still more ferocity. The rubble attacked him. A wild squall blew up a cloud of sand that stole away his field of vision.

Takaya blasted his <<nenpa >> into it blindly.

(I can't see a goddamned thing in this!)

The onryou took advantage of the chinks in his defense. Raging spirits grazed

against his shoulder, and something blade-like sliced down his flank.

"...!"

A sharp pain ran down his side as his clothes tore. Gritting his teeth against it, Takaya raised dagger-edged eyes.

"Don't fucking screw around with me!" he spat, and swung the Sword of Bishamonten . The onryou shot towards him like arrows.

Zap...!

With an electric sizzle, the Sword of Bishamonten lengthened like a laser

sword to mow down the onryou . But it was totally impossible for one person to end this!

"How much longer, Naoe!" Takaya shouted urgently after casting <<ressa-choubuku >> on the spirits. Naoe continued to chant with his eyes closed. Chiten 's power boiled up from the earth.

"Noumaku samanda bodanan harachibiei sowaka . Noumaku samanda bodanan harachibiei sowaka ..."

Naoe's eyes snapped open.

The ground began to rumble. Chiten had awakened. The rumbling of the earth was evidence of Chiten beginning to break apart the spell's 'platform' A refreshing 'energy' swelled up from beneath and enveloped Naoe and Takaya. Chiten had begun to cleanse the earth sullied by the curse with her purifying powers. This was Chiten 's curse-suppressing ritual.

Chiten began to disperse the invocation of the dead.

"All right! That's two problems solved in one stroke!"

Takaya thrust the Sword of Bishamonten into the ground. The powers of Chiten and Bishamonten fused. The sword glowed with an intense light. The countless onryou darted about, trying to escape. Naoe and Takaya formed the mudra of Bishamonten simultaneously.

"bai!"

The air around them froze. Several thousand spirits had been temporarily <<bound>>; they chanted in unison, "Noumakusamanda bodanan baishiramandaya sowaka !"

Walls enclosed the spirits in all directions. The energy gathered in their

fists swelled into a sphere of light in an instant.

"**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten** ! For this demon subjugation, lend us thy power!"

Plasmatic light shot out from their hands as their <<power>> reached its peak.

They cried out at the same time, "<<**Choubuku** >>!"

In the next instant—

A flash of light swallowed everything!

Naoe stood as quiet returned to the ruins once more and turned to Takaya

"That's one down."

The invocation of the dead had been dissolved. Takaya pulled the **Sword of Bishamonten** from the ground and shouldered it. The spirits, exorcised in one fell swoop, perhaps, had all disappeared with the <<**choubuku** >> light.

"Huh, that wasn't bad. It didn't take that much out of me."

"I shouldn't have asked Haruie and Nagahide to do three sites, then. Your way is probably more efficient."

Takaya eyed the brightly-flashing **Sword of Bishamonten** .

"But why doesn't this thing have a scabbard? Won't we get arrested by the police for walking around with a naked sword?"

"I did not think that you would have awakened thus far either," Naoe smiled wryly. "Let's do some preparation for the next location. But that sword can only cut into spiritual bodies, so we're quite safe."

Takaya returned his gaze. "Then let's hurry and get to the next site. Mogan will be making his moves when he notices us."

"True enough. Since we don't want to use <<power>> at an awkward place Let's go."

They departed.

The rituals at [Kyougamine](#) progressed steadily.

Chapter 6: The Blazing Grove

"What?! Masamune hath begun a neutralization ritual at [Kyougamine](#) ?!" [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) shouted when he received the report from the messenger.

"Is this true? Art thou certain?!"

A room in a hotel within the city. Yoshiyasu's messenger reported rapidly, "'Tis certain. Date is performing the dual rituals of '[Daiitoku Myouou-hou](#) ' and '[Gouzanze Myouou-hou](#) ' with the intention of breaking through Lord Yoshiyasu's '[kinrin no hou](#) '. Further, the Uesugi have evidently started to dissolve the <<[jike-kekkai](#) >>."

"What!"

Ueshima's face twisted. Yoshiaki had never imagined that Date would counterattack like this. Neither Date nor Uesugi should know of his true objective.

But Naoe, still in [Yamagata](#) , should have succumbed to [Ohigashi-no-Kata](#) 's hypnotic suggestion and been made a servant of Mogami by now.

"How doth Yoshiyasu?!"

"Lord Yoshiyasu immediately performed '[Dakiniten-hou](#) ' to counter Date. He hath already dispatched soldiers to [Kyougamine](#) , but Date's perimeter hath been fortified, and 'tis a hard battle..."

"Feh! What cunning, that cursed Date!" Yoshiaki's fists shook. "And the Uesugi? Can they be held back?"

"Mercy...because our enemy are [kanshousha](#) , by their strength alone the soldiers stationed in [Sendai](#) are..."

"Useless wretches!" Yoshiaki roared, then commanded decisively, "This [Sendai](#) , which hath finally begun moving into my hands—my plans shall not be

interrupted. Call the soldiers of Yamagata! I will destroy Date in one blow!"

"Yes, my lord!"

"Send word to Ashina! 'Tis time to tighten the noose around Date. Tell them to invade [Sendai](#) !"

"Yes, my lord!"

Glaring at the lights of [Sendai](#) spreading outside his window, Yoshiaki gnashed his teeth.

"Masamune, thou wretch... I shall not allow the likes of thee to interfere."

At [Kyougamine](#) , the '[rendan-hou](#) ' continued. Two hours had already passed. Flames leapt brightly in the two [fire-wheel platforms](#) .

The monks chanted their mantras without pause. On the platforms, Choukai and Keishun continued the rituals even as the blood climbed higher and higher on their increasingly ghastly-looking faces.

Meanwhile, Masamune and company had put Yuzuru, whose condition was odd, to sleep behind the curtain.

"What a terrible fever," Kojuurou said to Masamune. "He was in fine health just earlier. I cannot think but that this is caused by the ceremony."

"He hath worsened, so it seems, little by little as the ceremony progressed. 'Tis almost as if Narita-dono hath taken the curse upon himself."

A great power lies concealed within him.

So Keishun and Choukai had said of Yuzuru. Though all of them were still in the same place, only Yuzuru's condition had declined so drastically. Surely there was a connection.

(But what by the heavens is happening here...?)

"Dono!"

Masamune returned to himself as someone called to him. The feverish Yuzuru opened his eyes. He appeared to have finally regained consciousness.

"Art thou awake, Narita-dono?"

"How dost thou feel?"

Yuzuru looked dimly at Kojuurou, then Masamune.

"Lord Masamune..."

"Lie still for the nonce. We will protect this place—"

Yuzuru did not yet appear to have regained full consciousness, and hazy confusion filled his eyes.

He suddenly spoke as if in delirium: "The foxes...are moving."

Masamune and Kojuurou's eyes widened sharply.

"Eh?"

Yuzuru's eyes seemed fixed on somewhere far away, but his voice was oddly clear as he said, "Dakiniten has...sent her koko . Someone is counterattacking with 'Dakiniten-hou '. The foxes will be upon Kyougamine soon!"

"What!"

Yuzuru abruptly sat up. Kojuurou hurriedly moved to offer his assistance, but Yuzuru declined and slowly stood on his own.

"Narita-dono...!"

"The foxes are coming. Very soon," Yuzuru said very clearly, and walked towards the goma-dan .

"!"

Masamune and Kojuurou couldn't quite believe their eyes. Golden tendrils of light rose from Yuzuru's body. The threads of light intertwined in the air and reached up into empty space. Enveloped by this golden light, Yuzuru walked towards the two fire-wheel platform as if called by something there.

Kojuurou shouted, "Dono! There!"

"!"

Then, as if they had been waiting for Yuzuru, the flames within the two [fire-wheel platforms](#) surged with earth-shattering energy. They rose to a height of nearly five meters, flickering wildly.

"Aaaah!"

Everyone present shouted involuntarily. In the next instant, the huge [goma](#) fires had taken on the forms of the terrible, wrathful Wisdom Kings!

"Th-these are...!"

[Gouzanze Myouou](#) . [Daiitoku Myouou](#) .

What had appeared in the '[Gouzanze Myouou-hou](#) ' [fire-wheel platform](#) officiated by Choukai was the three-faced, eight-armed figure of [Gouzanze Myouou](#) , his hands crossed in the vajrahumkara [mudra](#) . [Gouzanze Myouou](#) was the Wisdom King who had surrendered the corrupting thoughts of avarice, rage, and ignorance in the service of [Diamond Realm Dainichi Nyorai](#) . Among the Wisdom Kings, he was second in rank only to [Fudou Myouou](#) and had subjugated [Daijizaiten](#) , also known as the god Shiva, on [Dainichi Nyorai](#) 's behalf.

Meanwhile, the six-faced, six-armed [Daiitoku Myouou](#) had appeared in Keishun's [fire-wheel platform](#) .

He was riding on the back of a water buffalo, and his hands were set in the ritual makouin. This was the protector of virtue and punisher of evil, the manifestation of the mighty Buddha of Endless Light and Life ([Amida Nyorai](#)) as a Wisdom King, [Daiitoku Myouou](#) .

The two Wisdom Kings who had taken shape in the flames stood directly facing Yuzuru. Yuzuru, enveloped by that golden light, looked straight up at them with no trace of agitation in his bearing.

Yuzuru quietly raised his left arm. He pointed at the empty sky as if in command.

The two flames suddenly swelled and climbed as if to engulf the sky.

The two Wisdom Kings spread across Sendai's night sky like a mantle over [Kyougamine](#) .

(What...!)

Masamune and company gasped and shivered.

Yuzuru solemnly watched over them with wide, god-touched eyes.

The Exalted [Gouzanze Myouou](#) —

The Exalted [Daiitoku Myouou](#) —

Had descended in the skies over [Sendai](#) .

"Kagetora-sama! There!"

"Huh?"

Takaya looked up at Naoe's shout.

"Holy...!" he gasped. The gigantic forms of the two Wisdom Kings had

appeared in the night sky over the city.

"Wh-what the hell is that?!"

"Gouzanze Myouou and Daiitoku Myouou ... Could that be—!"

Takaya turned to Naoe. "Kyougamine ... Is that the true power of the 'rendan-hou'?"

"But the Shugen priests of Haguro do not have such enormous powers. To make them manifest so clearly..."

For a moment Naoe was speechless. "There's just no way... What has happened? Who in the world performed a spell of this magnitude?!"

"Yuzuru...!"

At Takaya's murmur, Naoe's gaze shifted to him in surprise.

"Isn't it...Yuzuru? This mighty power... Isn't that Yuzuru's doing—?"

"...Yuzuru-san..."

Kousaka's words abruptly echoed in the back of his mind.

"Narita Yuzuru is a menace to the Roku Dou Sekai ."

This? Is this what he was talking about? This terrifying

<<power>> with the ability to awaken the Wisdom Kings and call on their presence?

A cold shiver ran down his spine, and he gazed up at the awe-inspiring forms of the Wisdom Kings towering above the city.

"! Naoe!"

"?"

He looked up at the sky in the opposite direction, where ominous, palely-glowing clouds had appeared. No, they were not clouds; they were...

(Foxes...!)

The 'koko' of Mogami Yoshiyasu !

Takaya and Naoe both shivered.

A mass of 'koko' ...Mogami had begun his attack on Kyougamine with 'Dakiniten-hou'.

But on a terrifying scale. They stretched across the sky for about a kilometer. Where in the world was Yoshiyasu getting so much power? The mass of 'koko' coalesced into the shape of one gigantic fox with lightning crackling from its body. It drew closer and closer, filled with terrifying spiritual energy.

"We seem to have underestimated Yoshiyasu, huh..."

Going at someone like him with his bare hands had been...Takaya recalled his recklessness with trepidation.

The 'koko' savagely attacked the Wisdom Kings. Gouzanze Myouou swung his six arms in mighty blows. The bellow of Daiitoku Myouou's water buffalo thundered across the sky. A battle between beings with powers

beyond human comprehension had begun.

"Kagetora-sama."

At the sound of Naoe's voice, Takaya turned his gaze forward once more. The barrier point at Aobayama.

The soldiers sent by Mogami against them had already arrived. Beyond them was the gigantic pillar formed from the spirits gathered there by the invocation of the dead.

"Hmph. Yeah, I know..." Takaya smiled defiantly. "We gotta take care of these guys before tranquilizing the earth. You wanna tell me that our task is to smash the barrier apart, right?"

"With the <<choubuku >>

of father and son, Yoshiaki and Yoshiyasu following. Please do not squander your <<power>> carelessly. I will protect you.

Please take care to preserve your strength."

"That's if we can afford it."

Naoe took in his smile with a quick sideways glance. The sternness suddenly vanished from his eyes.

"You...have not changed at all, have you?"

"Eh?"

Stepping in front of Takaya, Naoe filled himself with <<power>> and glared at the soldiers amassed against them.

"Please stay behind me."

"Naoe."

Takaya gripped his right arm, and Naoe turned. Takaya gazed at him with direct eyes.

"I...don't want you to die."

"Kagetora-sama?"

"I can't do without you. And I won't forgive you if you just carelessly exchange bodies. I won't forgive you, so."

Naoe's expression was serious.

"Is that a command from 'Uesugi Kagetora'?"

"So you won't listen if it's from 'Ougi Takaya'?" Takaya glared at him. "I won't forgive you for disobeying me, Naoe. This *my* command."

Ghosts waited expectantly.

The [Sword of Bishamonten](#) glinted sharply, the fangs of a tiger on the verge of pouncing on his prey.

Kokuryou's gentle face appeared in the back of his mind. Saying—no matter where you are, don't forget that you are yourself.

(—Gramps...)

The malice-filled ghosts made their move. Takaya shouted, "Watch and see, Gramps!"

The demon-conquering blade howled. Another battle had begun. Naoe

formed the ritual gesture of Bishamonten and cried, "Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !"

Mogami's warriors attacked, swinging their swords.

"bai!"

The group in the lead disappeared, engulfed by a violent gale. The warriors surrounded Takaya and Naoe in a flash. Takaya mowed them down

with the Sword of Bishamonten , and Naoe followed with <<ressa-choubuku >>.

Countless warriors fell by Takaya's blade. A sword grazed his arm. A Mogami warrior had come on him from behind. Naoe instantly struck it down. Takaya, too, shielded Naoe countless times as he formed the ritual gesture of Bishamonten .

"bai!"

"On dakini saharakyatei sowaka , on dakini saharakyatei sowaka ..."

Meanwhile, Mogami Yoshiyasu had put his entire being into performing the 'Dakiniten-hou ' to break the spell of Kyougamine .

His features, illuminated by goma-dan fires, looked all the more ghastly.

But it took no ordinary power to battle to a standstill two of the great Wisdom Kings. But why had he concealed it? With this fearsome

<<power>>, he could perhaps have annihilated Uesugi's Yasha-shuu .

(I did not recognize your strength.)

Kousaka Danjou watched over him soberly. —Ironically, the liberation of his mind from

obstructive thoughts had released Yoshiyasu's power. Until now, the tension that had always filled him had withered his mind. Because he had always lacked confidence in himself. Because he had never been able

to freely wield the power he carried.

(—Because of his father...?)

Not impossible, Kousaka thought, crossing his arms. The greatness of the father probably had to be taken into consideration.

"Reporting!" The Mogami messenger who had arrived relayed the bitter news, "Despite hard fighting, two of the barrier points of the <<jike-kekka>> have been dissolved!"

Yoshiyasu did not answer. He chanted the mantra of Dakiniten ceaselessly without even appearing to have heard the messenger's voice.

Kousaka replied on his behalf, "What of the warriors? What are they doing?"

"Well—" The messenger answered with trepidation, "They're vanishing as if sucked into a wind conjured by some strange magic."

(So the Uesugi, hmm...?)

Kousaka grinned.

"Gather the soldiers at the remaining three points. They must hold fast. This is Lord Yoshiyasu's command."

"Yes, my lord!" The messenger replied and rushed off.

A crow came winging past him and landed on Kousaka's arm.

It had been sent from Yamagata .

Kousaka said sharply in response to its message, "Truly?"

Disaster in Yamagata . Mogami's main army, on standby in Yamagata , seemed prepared to set out for Sendai at the worst possible time. Furthermore, Mogami had apparently issued the order for a general offensive against Date by his onshou allies. Kousaka's expression sobered.

"Guess I won't be an idle spectator for much longer, hmm? —Aye, I understand. Report to our lord. That I will take Sendai without fail. And to please leave matters here to me and advance soldiers into Yamagata . Then take this message to the Kouduke troops: Invade the Aizu immediately. We must not allow Ashina to make a move!"

The crow gave a single hoarse caw and flew off once more into the western sky.

Kousaka looked at Yoshiyasu's back.

(Now then... Shall we finish things here?)

The blade of a dagger glinted secretly within his coat.

Chiaki's <<nenpa >> smashed into the spirit pillar and exploded. He immediately began <<choubuku >>.

Under its cover, Ayako pressed forward with the earth-tranquilization ritual.

"Noumaku sanmanda bodanan harachibiei sowaka , noumaku sanmanda bodanan harachibiei sowaka —..."

Chiten 's power gushed forth like water from a spring to purify the curse-sullied earth.

Chiaki continued to perform <<choubuku >> again and again.

"Fuck! This is endless!"

Dozens of spirits disappeared with each iteration, but just how many of them had the invocation of the dead summoned? A stunning number. It was

impossible to place a <<gebaku >> on them even with <<kouhou-choubuku >>. But more terrible still was the fact that so many spirits were not able to pass on to the next life.

"Whatever the path, you can't stay in this world!" Chiaki shouted, performing <<choubuku >> with loud abandon. The onryou attacked like a tsunami.

"bai!"

He put he had everything into it, and nearly a hundred spirits vanished at the same time. Then—

"...!"

Chiaki's sixth sense tingled faintly.

Somewhere, someone was wielding the <<choubuku >> power of the Sword of Bishamonten .

(Kagetora?)

He could think of no other explanation. Chiaki's lips curved in a grin.

"Huh. Wouldn't be interesting otherwise..."

He'd been waiting for this. With Kagetora's awakening, he had a rival.

And the Kagetora who wielded that <<power>>—he had been

Chiaki's only rival for the past four hundred years.

"!"

The asphalt cracked apart right next to him.

"Ugh...!"

The onryou struck at Chiaki with their <<nenpa >>, precipitating a violent explosion.

Chiaki raised his eyes sharply.

Kagetora had awakened...!

"I'm not gonna lose to you, Kagetora!" he roared.

"Come and get some!"

The [Sword of Bishamonten](#) tore apart the ghosts.

Takaya cut down the warriors still obstinately advancing in succession, taking out fifty at a time without even blinking.

"...you bastards!"

He panted unsteadily, gripped by weariness. But he could not rest.

His movements dulled. The warriors pressed forward mercilessly.

"...!"

He turned to slay an attacking warrior. But another advanced on him from the right at the same time!

"bai!"

Naoe's intervention saved Takaya.

"Are you all right, Kagetora-sama!"

"I'm...fine..."

Takaya raised his head abruptly and shouted, "Naoe, behind you!"

The warrior was on the verge of cutting Naoe down. Naoe nearly dodged it but the blade grazed his temple.

"Fucking bastard!"

Takaya formed the ritual gesture.

"bai!"

Dozens of warriors disappeared in a blink.

Perhaps finally rattled, the soldiers broke ranks and began to run.

Takaya turned to Naoe without giving chase. Naoe's temple was bleeding

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. But you've exhausted so much of your strength..."

"Heh. Exhausted? This is nothing," Takaya responded, wiping sweat from his neck and giving Naoe a fearless grin without a hint of tiredness.

"Let's hurry up and get rid of the invocation of the dead. We can't just leave that thing there forever."

"True enough. Maybe it's just my imagination, but I think the

<<malice>> in the city has been gradually fading. If

Mogami's power has fallen even a small amount, then all the better for [Kyougamine](#) ..."

"What they're doing is none of our business." Battle-lust glittered in

Takaya's eyes. "What we gotta do is finish these guys off."

His gaze, sharp and dazzlingly clear, seemed almost to belong to a wild tiger.

"Let's go, Naoe!"

Takaya raised the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) and dashed forward, Naoe

keeping pace immediately behind him.

Exploding <<nenpa >>. Shattering asphalt. The onryou pummeled them with <<nenpa >>.

(I will not let them touch one finger of his body!)

Showering rubble. Naoe put all his will into the <<goshinha >> he erected around them.

(I'll show you how I will continue to protect him...!)

Onryou attacked from the sky. Naoe formed the ritual gesture. Takaya swung the Sword of Bishamonten .

A incredible number of onryou charged them.

"Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten !" Raising the Sword high, Takaya shouted at the top of his voice, "To this hand...! Lend me thy power!"

In the sky over Sendai , the spell-battle between Yoshiyasu and Kyougamine grew ever fiercer.

Koko without number ran freely about the skies of Sendai . Daiitoku Myouou 's water buffalo bellowed, and the two Wisdom Kings annihilated foxes with enraged war-cries.

The spells of Kyougamine and Yoshiyasu clashed in the skies above Sendai . The powers of the two sides were almost equal. Neither let the other take a single step forward.

The battle increased in vehemence. An immense, fearsome energy shook

the earth and conjured dark clouds that split the sky apart with lightning.

Naoe's <<nenpa >> broke apart the rubble that came hurtling at them again and again. Takaya mowed down the spirits with the [Sword of Bishamonten](#)

A fresh troop of skeletal warriors appeared opposite them!

"There's more?! Feh!" Takaya spat in disgust, and gathered his will.

Fissures ran through the asphalt with loud cracks. The ground broke apart beneath the skeletal warriors' feet, and they collapsed like dominoes.

"Let's settle things here first, Naoe! Gimme a hand!"

"At your command!"

No soon said than Takaya began running. The [onryou](#) shot straight at Takaya!

"No you don't!"

Naoe created a <<[goshinheki](#) >> with layers of <<[goshinha](#) >> and interposed it between Takaya and the [onryou](#) .

Pak pak pak!

The <<[goshinheki](#) >> intercepted the <<[nenpa](#) >>

with a sound like crackling firecrackers. Takaya commenced their counter-assault with his will shooting out like bullets from a machine

gun. The onryou scattered.

However.

"...!"

At that moment, the spirit-pillar broke apart, and all of the individual spirits crowded around Takaya and Naoe angrily. ...Not good!

"Ugh...!"

A razor whirlwind pummeled Naoe and tore into his clothes and flesh with a dull scratching sound.

"! ...Naoe!"

The ground exploded at his feet as Takaya cried out, and he turned, shielding himself.

Mogami's warriors crowded against his back.

(We're surrounded...?!)

Takaya dashed towards Naoe. Naoe scanned the area around them, panting

with the pain of his wounds. An enormous number of spirits surrounded them, filling their entire field of vision.

"It's been a while since we faced this many of them."

"<<Ressa-choubuku >>? We're gonna run out of energy before we're finished."

Naoe looked at Takaya as the blood dripped from his cheek. Takaya glared at the spirits, the **Sword of Bishamonten** poised.

"Humph. Whatever, I don't care."

"Kagetora-sama!"

"This is what calls for *power*, huh? ...!"

<<**Nenpa**>> blasted from the **onryou** right next to him. Takaya shielded himself for a moment before yelling, "Let's deal with all of 'em!"

Energy gushed from Takaya's body. His <<power>> exploded!

Crackle!

A blast of silver lightning mowed down the besieging **onryou** instantly. The asphalt around them cracked apart, and fire spouted from the ground. The flames undulated in midair like a blazing dragon and swallowed the **onryou**. Terrible screams rent the night from every direction.

"I'll make you rest in peace right now!"

Takaya sprinted forward. The **razor whirlwind** grazed against him countless times, cutting through clothes and skin, but could not stop him.

"Kagetora-sama!"

Naoe covered him with a <<**nenpa**>>. The **onryou** attacked with ever more ferocity. Countless explosions rocked the ground. The blasts bombarded them.

"Don't screw with me—!"

The **Sword of Bishamonten** whistled through the air. Naoe formed the ritual gesture. Takaya raised the Sword high.

"bai!"

Its flare tore apart the darkness. All the spirits caught within its slanting beam instantly disappeared. The crowd of spirits immediately scattered in all directions.

"You're not getting away! ...Ugh!"

An explosion threw Takaya tumbling.

"Kagetora-sama!" Naoe shouted, and sprinted to Takaya's side as the skeletal warriors' <<**nenpa**>> rained down on him.

"Ug...h..."

Pain warped Takaya's face; his foot seemed to have been injured. Naoe's eyes flashed as he looked up.

"You...!"

"! Naoe...!"

An amber aura flared around Naoe. He stood against the **onryou** 's <<**nenpa**>> with a hitherto quiescent energy and deflected them all.

Rumble!

Naoe's flames swirled and coiled, burning the **onryou** to nothing. The **onryou** 's power plummeted.

"Now, Kagetora-sama!"

"All right!"

Both of them formed the ritual gesture. "bai!"

"**Noumakusamanda bodanan bai shiramandaya sowaka !**"

"**Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten !** For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

The **onryou** howled.

Light flared from their fists.

"<<**Choubuku** >>!"

"On sonbanisonba un bazara un hatta—..."

"**On shuchiri kyaro roha un kan sowaka** —..."

The bright goma flames continued to blaze as the monks' mantras echoed eerily.

Yuzuru had been watching protectively over the fire-wheel rituals for a while. He stared motionlessly at the monks as they prayed, their attention focused and not wavering for even an instant. The faint golden light around him allowed no one to approach. But his mind appeared to be in the skies above **Sendai** , battling the foxes.

"Dono!"

Masamune turned to Shigezane as he dashed over.

"What news, Shigezane?"

"The Mogami warriors in [Sendai](#) appear to be moving furiously. [Suda-dono](#) on the outside hath requested aid."

"What...?!"

A ferocious battle between their troops had already commenced within the city. Mogami seemed to be aiming for [Kyougamine](#). The two armies had already skirmished quite close, but within the Date's impregnable fortress, they still had the advantage.

"Very well. Send relief troops from [Watari](#). I leave the command of the soldiers within the city to Suda and thee."

"There are two barrier points remaining?"

"'Twill be but a matter of time for Uesugi-dono. But Mogami's '[Dakiniten-hoi](#)'

is quite strong. We must not be unprepared even when the barrier vanishes. I have a feeling that the enemy hath something in store. Attend to thy guard."

"Aye," Shigezane responded cheerfully and departed. His face glowed at the prospect of battle like a fish reaching water. He hadn't changed at all from what he had been in his former life, Masamune thought, gazing after him.

At his side, Kojuurou said, "But the Mogami curse-caster is quite tenacious as well, is he not?"

"According to Naoe-dono, 'tis Mogami's son, Yoshiyasu."

"Thy cousin, then?"

"As usual, he shows no mercy to those near to him," Masamune spat in disgust.

Black clouds loomed down from the sky, accompanied by flashes of lightning and roars of thunder. Ordinary people would have no way of knowing that this was from the battle between the [koko](#) and the two Wisdom Kings. The fearsome power of the two sides were equal.

(Who will run out of power first?) Masamune looked over at Yuzuru. (Can he win against Yoshiyasu with his power?)

Yuzuru stood calmly. His gaze followed the summoned combatants like a commander watching over the battlefield.

It was obvious that Yuzuru was the one manipulating the two Wisdom Kings. His eyes blazed and glittered as if awaiting some opportunity. Even his composure was a palpable thing. A faint smile played about his lips. If Takaya had been there, he would probably have rubbed his eyes, not quite knowing if this was really Yuzuru. He looked very like the Yuzuru who had been possessed by Shingen.



There was cruelty in his dilated eyes.

A chill ran down Masamune's spine.

(Who is he, this young man...?)

"Dono!"

He turned at the sound of someone calling to him and saw [Moniwa Sagetsu](#) sprinting toward him urgently.

"Dono! The city—the people of the city look strange!"

"Strange? What meanest thou?"

"A large crowd is heading for [Kyougamine](#) ! They come from everywhere, their aim set squarely on [Kyougamine](#) ...!"

"What...?!"

"Each carries some weapon-like object. I cannot think but that they are being controlled. 'Tis as if some riot has begun...Dono!"

The retainers all turned to Masamune. The blood drained out of his face.

(Surely not...!)

"bai"

Skeletal warriors disappeared at Ayako's single command.

In the meantime, Chiaki Shuuhei and Kadowaki Ayako were at the Komegabukuro barrier point near [Kyougamine](#) . They had already dispersed the invocation of the dead there, and were tidying up the odd remaining warrior.

"I'm pretty much done here. How 'bout you, Nagahide?"

"Finished. Once Kagetora and Naoe wrap up their sites, we'll be completely done," Chiaki said, moving to leave. "Let's get back to [Kyougamine](#) for now. Something's bothering me. There's something strange about the ferocity of that spell-battle in the sky."

"Yeah. I've been feeling it for a while, too... ?" Ayako stared at something on the road. "Wait, Nagahide. Look—"

"Eh?"

A line of people moved down the road. Adults, children—all of them looked like ordinary city folk, but they continued down the road in

endless succession, heading for some unknown destination.

"It's not some kind of parade...is it?"

"Wait, Haruie. Look carefully."

Each person carried a bat or wooden sword or kitchen cleaver or knife.

Some even had Japanese katanas: obviously objects that could be used as

weapons. What in the world were they doing?

"Nagahide! Over here, too!"

On the road behind them, more people followed each other down the road.

Their expressions were dull and empty, and they walked along with the same gait, heading in the same direction. What were they doing? Where were these people going?

"...!"

Chiaki sucked in a startled breath. He had felt the strange 'energy'

above their heads. Ayako also noticed it. Some massive concentration of 'energy' enveloped these people, drawing them forward. A

<<malice>>-filled 'energy'. It was—

(Foxes...! The foxes' 'energy'!)

"No way!"

Chiaki and Ayako shuddered.

The townspeople walked along, pulled forward by their fox-controlled souls.

(They're not really...!)

They could not let this continue. No sooner thought than Chiaki's <<power>> filled his entire body.

"Scatter!"

His will, shot forth with all his might, crashed into the foxes'

'energy concentration'. For a moment it seemed that the lumps of energy might be dispersed, but some portions remained behind and could not be removed. They were 'energy concentrations' of considerable strength.

But that was to be expected. They were, after all, woven by the [koko](#) of [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) 's 'Dakiniten-hou '.

"Bastard!"

He struck with his will again and again, but to no effect. A few people staggered, but he could not remove the 'energy' controlled them.

"No way!" Ayako wailed. The people walked silently forward. Their goal was...ahead of them was...!

([Kyougamine](#) !)

Mogami intended to use these people to attack [Kyougamine](#) .

Mogami's ghostly warriors had been destroyed one after another by the Date's strength. But Masamune would not raise a hand against these townspeople who had nothing to do with the battle. Having thought thus far, he could only use the '[kinrin no hou](#) ' in this manner!

"Dammit! You're a coward, Mogami!" Chiaki shouted as he attacked with his will again and again. The lumps of energy would continue to multiple as long as their true form ([koko](#)) did not disappear. But even Kagetora's power was probably futile against that enormous [koko](#) battling the [Daiitoku](#) and [Gouzanze](#) Wisdom Kings! Right now these people could not be reached!

"For Heaven's sake! Wake up! Hey, wake up, dammit!"

The townspeople continued to walk towards [Kyougamine](#) .

To destroy Masamune and the Date!

Chapter 7: Conflagration scorching Heaven

"Defend the shrine-path! Let no one approach the Zuihouden ! Overlook nothing, even to the tiniest ants!"

The warriors gathered on the path to the Zuihouden had constructed a barricade to check the mob advancing on Kyougamine . Their commander was Katakura Koujuurou Kagetsuna .

Masamune asked, his face hard, "What dost thou plan? We must not harm the people of this city."

"Seek out the curse-caster and force him to release his hold. If we cannot settle this with spells, then I will cut Yoshiyasu down with my own hands. I will kill him and stop the 'Dakiniten-hou'!"

"Marry, the mob will soon be upon us! Canst thou do so in time? Even if thou shouldst find him, 'twill be no easy thing to approach him in the Mogami camp!"

"Then we will contact Uesugi-dono...! Let them strike at Yoshiyasu with their power of <<choubuku >>, Dono!"

"Can we bear to wait for their aid?!"

Just then.

"They're here!" a sentry cried. The fox-controlled mob was pushing towards them.

"Hmph...!" Masamune tsked grimly.

"Dono!" Kojuurou shouted. People bearing weapons were climbing up the hill road leading to the stone stairs.

Masamune glanced at the [Zuihouden](#) . The ceremonies continued. But the end seemed nowhere in sight.

Yuzuru only stared fixedly at the [goma platforms](#) .

Masamune gnashed his teeth.

(Make haste, Narita-dono: defeat Yoshiyasu...!)

The mob neared the stairs. Masamune stopped the warriors from drawing their swords sharply.

"We must not raise a hand against these people! Sheathe your swords!"

"But, Dono...!"

"Defend the barrier! Allow not passage past this point!"

Grinding their teeth in anguished frustration, the Date warriors concentrated their will. An invisible wall formed around [Kyougamine](#) .

Gyaaah!

It flicked away the approaching mob, and screams rang out in succession. But none of the townspeople stopped walking. All of them collided with the wall head-on. Here and there bright sparks shot out from the points of impact.

(This cannot continue...!)

The constant impacts were weakening the wall of will. Masamune shouted, "More! Put more power into it!"

"Dono!"

People flung themselves at the wall again and again in an attempt to break through. Violent sparks flew. There were too many of them!

Waaaah—! the mob roared, and surged at the wall.

They broke through in one fell swoop!

"Draw back, Dono! We will hold here!"

"Kojuurou!"

The mob attacked like a tsunami. The warriors drew their swords in a single motion.

"Do not let them pass! We must not let them pass!" Kojuurou roared. The fox-controlled mob rushed up the stairs. But their numbers were so many that to fight was impossible. The warriors were engulfed in a moment, and chaos reigned.

"No! Let them not pass to the [Zuihouden](#) !"

Waaaaaaah—! the mob screamed. Each of the townspeople carried a weapon. The Date defense collapsed against the overwhelming rush in the blink of an eye.

<<[On kiri kaku un sowaka](#) ...>>

<<On kiri kaku un sowaka !>>

The 'energy' of the foxes danced above each person as they screamed shrilly and cavorted in ecstasy!

"I will not let them pass!"

Masamune finally drew his sword. Kojuurou cried, "'Tis dangerous here! Please draw back, Dono!"

"I will not! This spot will I defend to the last! I will not draw back a single step!"

"Dono!"

The mob crashed forward like a tsunami...!

The single eye glinted!

"I will not let them pass!"

The mob was on the verge of striking.

In that moment.

Disaster struck.

"I"

Yoshiyasu inhaled, and his mantra stopped.

Plunk.

A sharp blade tore into Yoshiyasu's flesh.

It sank into him with a dull sound. Mogami Yoshiyasu gave a short moan.

"Guu...uuh...!"

He turned to see a dagger buried deeply inside him. Holding its hilt was—

Kousaka Danjou .

"Thou..."

Yoshiyasu gazed at Kousaka disbelievingly. Kousaka pulled the dagger out with no discernable expression on his face.

Yoshiyasu tumbled from the platform. Blood stained his priest's robes.

"Aaah...! Aaaah!"

Kousaka looked at the writhing Yoshiyasu coldly. Yoshiyasu held out a hand wet with blood towards Kousaka.

"Why...why...art...!"

A cold, sly smile appeared on Kousaka's face as he kicked Yoshiyasu's hands off his ankles.

"Never trust another person to this extent in the world of the Sengoku ."

"..."

"You should be a bit more cunning in your next life...!"

Kousaka thrust the dagger into the back of Yoshiyasu's hand as he reached for his tatami.

"Gyaaaah!"

With an ugly scream, Yoshiyasu's spirit body tried to leave his vessel in an attempt to escape the agony. But in that moment...!

<<Neeagh!>>

The violently raging forms of the two Wisdom Kings appeared before him.

Gouzanze Myouou , Daiitoku Myouou !

The powers summoned at Kyougamine had immediately converged on Yoshiyasu in the instant he stopped his spell.

The ferocious water buffalo bellowed fearsomely. Gouzanze bared his teeth. His fourteen arms seized Yoshiyasu's soul.

<<Le-let me go...! Nooo!>>

The Wisdom King visited cruel retribution upon the soul in his grasp, tearing off Yoshiyasu's arms and gouging out his intestines.

Blood gushed from Yoshiyasu's spirit body. His bones cracked and snapped.

Yoshiyasu's soul screamed horrifyingly.

<<FATHER!>>

!

His death screams throbbed in the air.

Mogami Yoshiyasu crumbled away before the two Wisdom Kings in unimaginable agony.

Leaving behind the remnants of what might be called an intense 'terror'.

As if he were savoring those residual feelings, a chill smile filled Kousaka's entire face.

(Rest in peace this time, Yoshiyasu.)

People started to crumble like puppets with their strings cut.

"What...!"

The Date stared disbelievingly.

In the moment that the mob had been about to attack Masamune and his forces, the energy of the foxes completely disappeared. Mogami Yoshiyasu 's 'Dakiniten-hou ' abruptly ceased.

"Wh-what is..."

The people of the city collapsed in heaps.

Masamune and company gazed at them in dumbfounded bewilderment.

The line of townspeople folded in the blink of an eye.

"..."

He suddenly realized that Yuzuru was walking towards him from behind.

"... Narita-dono."

"Masamune-dono. Mogami Yoshiyasu 's curse has been successfully exorcised." Yuzuru reported calmly. "The koko will appear no longer. Be at ease."

"—..."

He could not feel any true gladness.

A ruthless killer gazed out of Yuzuru's eyes as he smiled an enigmatic smile.

A chill ran down Masamune's back.

"...!"

Naoe whirled. The aura of the 'Dakiniten-hou ' had disappeared. The koko had lost their power.

(Was Yoshiyasu killed?)

"Naoe!"

He turned at the sound of Takaya's voice and saw a skeletal warrior pressing up behind him.

"!"

Takaya struck with his <<nenpa >>. The skeleton was sent flying. Naoe formed the ritual gesture.

"bai!"

The warrior was exorcised. He had been the last.

Taking one deep breath, Naoe stood.

The earth-tranquilization of the barrier point was complete.

"Kagetora-sama."

"Right..." Takaya regained his breath, still holding the Sword of Bishamonten . "Let's finish this, Naoe."

"Yes."

They stood back-to-back, Takaya facing east, Naoe facing west.

"Adarsa-jnana !"

"Samata-jnana !"

"Pratyaveksana-jnana !"

"Krityanusthana-jnana !"

They drew several large Sanskrit characters in the air.

"Hara dobou onboken shutan sirii ."

They chanted the Kisshou Joudohen mantra and quietly pressed their

hands together in prayer. The

cleansing of the earth was complete. The barrier had now been completely dissolved.

"All right." Takaya relaxed his hands. "So now if the ceremonies at [Kyougamine](#) can just neutralize the 'kinrin no hou ', we're good."

"Kagetora-sama. The signs point to [Mogami Yoshiyasu](#) having fallen to a curse at [Kyougamine](#) ."

"Eh?" Takaya turned.

Naoe said, "It's odd that he'd be killed by a curse, isn't it? Since he is a spirit. ...In any case, the '[Dakiniten-hou](#) ' has stopped. [Kyougamine](#) appears to have won the spell battle."

"Killed by a curse... Then Yoshiyasu's soul is—"

"His soul is probably wounded. The wounds of the soul cannot be healed by purification in the other world. The soul crumbles and loses the power to remain in this world. For the [onshou](#) of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#)>> it is the same as 'death'. ...?"

He noticed Takaya's right hand. The bandage had come loose, and blood was flowing again from the wound. Naoe took the hand in his and carefully rewrapped the bandage.

"Let's take this opportunity to strike at [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) , Kagetora-sama. Once he learns of his disadvantage, he will likely start a war. If it is on a large enough scale, it will be the same—no, worse—than what we saw in [Matsumoto](#) two months ago. It may destroy

Sendai . Let's take some measures before that should happen—"

"So we're going after the general's head?"

"Yoshiaki is the root of all this evil. We will perform <<choubuku >> on Mogami Yoshiaki ."

Takaya's eyes sharpened.

"Where is he now?"

"At his hotel, or maybe at Ueshima's favorite restaurant... No, with this state of affairs, he may already be in his camp."

"Camp? Where is that?"

"I don't know. Probably the place where the 'Dakiniten-hou ' was performed earlier. It would probably be fastest to have Haruie perform a spiritual sensing .

"All right. So we should get back to Kyougamine for now. Haruie should be there too."

And the two of them hurriedly headed back.

Onshou from various territories were gathering in Sendai .

Arriving at the temple, Mogami Yoshiaki stared down at the crumbled form of the young man lying in front of the goma platform .

Fresh blood stained the tatami.

"Yoshiyasu...!"

He dropped to his knees.

Kousaka Danjou was nowhere to be seen. He had hurriedly departed after stabbing Yoshiyasu.

Yoshiaki was utterly ignorant of these events.

"You...cursed Date...!"

194 奥の細道 4 《琥珀の流星群》



"So please you, Lord!" A soldier approached and reported, "There is a messenger from Ashina-dono who says the Ashina army cannot send troops to Sendai !"

"What! What dost thou mean?!"

"The Takeda army has begun invading from Kouduke and Shimotsuke ! To defend against the invasion, Ashina is unable to move from Aizu !"

"What! Takeda?!" Yoshiaki exclaimed, filled with wrath. "NOW?!"

"Reporting!"

Another messenger arrived.

"Takeda has broken through our troops at the Echigo border and is on the verge of invading Yamagata !"

"What! Truly?!"

"The soldiers in Yamagata are in disarray. They are awaiting thy orders, my lord!"

"Orders? Kojirou should...Oyoshi should be there!"

The messenger reported in an anguished voice, "Yoshihime -sama was <<exorcised>> by the Uesugi!"

"What...! What?!" Yoshiaki paled. "Yoshi? What of that man—Naoe? What of—what of Kojirou, is he unharmed?!"

"The Uesugi seems to have escaped, and Kojirou-dono's whereabouts are unknown..."

"Thou worthless...!" Yoshiaki's slap sent the messenger flying. "How can...all of this...at the pivotal juncture of this battle...!"

His fists shook.

"Thou damned Takeda. Thou damned Uesugi...!"

"Dono! What of Yamagata !"

"Mmph... It matters not if I should discard Yamagata now. Gather the entire army in Sendai ! We will annihilate Date and make this our stronghold!"

Yoshiaki added to himself, his voice a moan, "If I...if I can but hold Sendai in my hand, this country is mine. I shall rule it all. If I but had this—"

He hurriedly stood.

"Move our stronghold to Aoba Hill . Inform the troops. Destroy Date. Prepare for the pivotal battle."

"Yes, my lord!"

The messenger ran off. Yoshiaki gazed coldly down at the young man in priestly robes lying crumbled at his feet.

"I shall not be defeated. I shall not be the loser."

"Uesugi-dono! I'm glad that thou hast returned!"

Masamune, clad in black armor and helm, welcomed Takaya and Naoe back to Kyougamine .

"Lord Masamune. The barrier has been dissolved."

"That thou art safely returned is above all. Mogami Yoshiaki hath been defeated. We have won the spell-battle."

"Yeah... But anyway, what the heck is going on? On the way here we saw a lot of people lying asleep. What in the world happened? You didn't do anything to them, did you?!"

"They were controlled by Mogami's hypnotic suggestion. Yoshiyasu dispatched ordinary townsfolk to attack [Kyougamine](#) .

The control was broken in the nick of time, but to return them to their senses here would result in great chaos, so we placed another suggestion on them. They will sleep until the battle is ended."

"So that's why..."

Masamune smiled quietly.

"We prepare for battle. A spy hath reported the siege web woven by Mogami and the other [onshou](#) moving to tighten around us. We will meet their attack."

"...So you're determined?"

"We are commanders. This is the way of the [Sengoku](#) . Nanbu and Satake will attack from the north. Whereupon our soldiers will go out to meet them.

Takaya took a long hard look at Masamune's magnificent black armor, glinting majestically in the firelight.

(The One-Eyed Dragon Masamune...)

The crescent moon crest on his helmet flashed, breathtakingly beautiful. Takaya unconsciously straightened.

(To have that eye looking at me—)

"Kagetora."

Chiaki appeared from the area around the [goma platforms](#) . He and Ayako had returned earlier. The fire-wheel ceremonies of the 'Daiitoku and [Gouzanze Myouou-hou](#) ' continued in front of the [Zuihouden](#) .

"The neutralization of the '[kinrin no hou](#) ' is progressing well. It'll be finished soon if we don't get any interference. The curse on [Sendai](#) will be completely erased, and the suggestion should be removed, too."

"Right. Anyway, where's Yuzuru?"

"About that...Uesugi-dono."

"?"

Yuzuru was seated in a grove of cedar trees a little apart from the [goma platforms](#) . His eyes were open, but he sat unmoving as if in a trance.

"He hath been thus ever since Yoshiyasu was defeated. As if he sees naught and hears naught."

Takaya moved to Yuzuru's side. Yuzuru gave no reaction. Takaya squatted and slapped Yuzuru's cheeks lightly.

"Yuzuru... Hey, Yuzuru..."

Yuzuru didn't seem to notice. Takaya slapped him a little harder.

"Yuzuru. ...Hey, it's me. Yuzuru!"

"...?"

Life suddenly returned to Yuzuru's eyes. He looked back at Takaya as if he had just come back to himself.

"Takaya?"

"You back, Yuzuru? You okay?"

"I..."

Yuzuru looked around at himself.

"What have I been doing? What happened with the ceremonies? Takaya, what about you guys...?"

"You don't remember anything?"

"Uuuhm...?"

He appeared to have no memory of what had happened. Of controlling Daiitoku and Gouzanze.

Nearby, both Masamune and Naoe looked grim.

"He is dangerous, is he not?"

"So that terrible spell-casting earlier was indeed Yuzuru-san?"

"Mmm... Which is his true nature? In any case, his powers are beyond that of a human being. If 'twere not so, then he would not be able to command the Wisdom Kings like servants."

"Powers beyond that...of a human being...?" Naoe's face stiffened. "Lord Masamune. What in the world do you—"

"Dono!"

Kojuurou trotted over from the opposite side.

"What is't, Kagetsuna?"

"Dono. Kousaka-dono...[Kousaka Danjou](#) -dono requests an audience!"

"What!"

All of them reacted sharply to that announcement. Following behind the Date retainer was, without question, [Kousaka Danjou](#) .

"You are departing for the front at last, Date-dono?"

"Bastard...!"

Takaya leapt up. Naoe held him back. Takaya yelled hotly, "Let me go, Naoe! ...Are you—are you Kousaka, damn you?!"

Kousaka looked at Takaya with cool impassiveness.

"Ah, Kagetora-dono. You're here as well?"

"Kousaka, damn you! How dare...how *dare* you touch Gramps and his wife...!"

"You can't, Kagetora-sama! You must restrain yourself for now!"

Kousaka turned to Masamune, ignoring the struggling Takaya.

"Mogami intends to make [Aoba Castle](#) his stronghold."

"What?"

"Yoshiaki has entered [Aoba Castle](#) . The main body of his army has not yet arrived from [Yamagata](#) . If we should take his head, there is still time—"

Kousaka cast a glance at Takaya. Takaya swallowed his rage and glared at Kousaka. He stepped forward.

"Lend me your soldiers, Lord Masamune. We will go to [Aoba Castle](#) and perform <<[choubuku](#)>> on [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) ."

"Uesugi-dono—"

"If we can take him down, the rest will be small-fry. The Mogami will crumble. We're heading out now, Naoe, Chiaki."

"Right," both of them replied, following as Takaya turned on his heels.

(Just you wait, [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) .)

He looked up at the eerily swirling clouds. The wind brought with it the smell of blood.

Chapter 8: Funeral Procession of the Fireflies

Takaya and the Yasha-shuu had decided to mount an attack on Aoba Castle as soon as they learned that Mogami Yoshiaki was moving to establish his stronghold there.

The main body of the Mogami army would be slow to react. Yoshihime had been <<exorcised>> by Naoe, and Kojirou seemed to have disappeared. Takeda had attacked the leaderless army and left it in disarray. —But however late to deploy, it would certainly enter Sendai by early dawn.

It was already past midnight.

The Mogami army in Sendai had been decimated in battles with Date and the Uesugi Yasha-shuu . Mogami Yoshiaki had regrouped his remaining troops in Aoba Castle to await the arrival of the main body of his army, and from all

appearances had every intention of challenging Date to a final battle.

The troops of Nanbu and Satake were already close at hand. Masamune seemed prepared to fight a decisive battle. However—

Takaya was disinclined to repeat the failures of Matsumoto .

They had to kill General Mogami Yoshiaki immediately to prevent a war that would rip Sendai apart.

(If we can just take the head of the general—)

The troops would no longer be able to enter into battle—that was Takaya's evaluation of the situation.

He had discussed it with Masamune. They could not allow a battle that would harm the ordinary city folk, Masamune had agreed, and consented to a raid into [Aoba Castle](#) . However—

"Even so, neither can we hand over [Sendai](#) to those [onshou](#) slipping in beneath our very noses. If they should attack, we have but one choice: to meet them. We must strike."

"Lord Masamune, but that would be..."

"Uesugi-dono." Masamune's single eye narrowed warningly. "Why dost thou

think we the dead have arisen against the natural order of the world?

'Tis because we wish to protect [Sendai](#) . We live on borrowed time to protect this land of our descendants from all comers."

"—"

"'Twill be enough for those from the [Sengoku](#) to do battle. We will protect [Sendai](#) with the last whisper of strength in our souls."

"..."

Takaya had no words with which to refute him. After a moment of silence, he said, "... All right."

[Aoba Castle](#) , once the seat of the Date in [Sendai](#) , was now occupied by Mogami's troops.

"What mortification, to have the Date's [Aoba Castle](#) taken by Mogami," the

armor-clad Shigezane muttered, grinding his

teeth. He was standing in front of the large bridge leading into [Aoba Castle](#) . [Date Shigezane](#) , leading eighty-odd soldiers, had been commanded by Masamune to aid the [Yasha-shuu](#) . They were on alert while scouting out the castle.

Around five hundred troops stood between them and [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) . A pale hazy light rose from the castle ruins as they approached its vicinity.

"But it really is an amazing castle," Chiaki murmured in admiration.

"It's like this terrain was made for it. It's a true natural stronghold."

The [Hirose River](#) flowed in wide meandering curves at the foot of Aoba Hill, on which the

castle stood. Behind it was the Waterfall's Mouth Marsh, where a cliff dropped sharply into a valley approximately 80 meters below. It made for a natural moat.

"[Aoba Castle](#) is not so easily breached. Appropriate for us Date, isn't it? Those who

wish to enter must ford one of the bridges. 'Tis likely the reason for their close-held defense," Shigezane said, oddly high-spirited. From all appearances, he was a man who had returned for the fight. "But 'tis a strange feeling, mounting an attack on our own castle. ...I've wanted to test its strength. Methinks 'twill be a worthy endeavor."

"Shigezane-dono. Where does the defense appear weakest?" Naoe inquired, and Shigezane grinned.

"Worry not. We know this castle inside and out. We will guide you through. You need only follow."

Shigezane turned to Takaya.

"With your power, we have more than enough to get through. Let us go, Uesugi-dono."

Takaya nodded, his eyes alighting.

Shigezane commanded, "Charge—!"

Oooooooooou—!

The Date skeletal warriors rushed the bridge with a fierce roar.

They were met by a party of warriors immediately upon crossing the bridge. Leading the charge, the armor-clad Shigezane lay about him with his sword at the head of the Date troops.

Thunk.

Skeletons dropped with dull thuds. The Date soldiers drove straight into Mogami's warriors. The two armies clashed in a great chaotic melee. The *Yasha-shuu* flew into it.

"Outta my way—!"

Skreen.

A howling gale ripped into the warriors from the *Sword of Bishamonten* wielded by Takaya, and those sucked into it disappeared.

"Ari nari tonari anaro nabi kunabi !"

Naoe and the other Yasha-shuu followed.

"bai!"

Here and there the air warped, and warriors vanished. The <<choubuku >> of the Yasha-shuu sent one after another of those who stood in their way to the next world.

"bai!"

"bai!"

Takaya cut down all those blocking his path with the Sword of Bishamonten as he dashed forward. At his back, Chiaki exorcised the spirits directly in front of them. Ayako warded off the spirits attacking from the left, while Naoe's ressa-choubuku cleared their right.

Their combined strength overwhelmed the soldiers defending the bridge in the blink of an eye.

"This way, Uesugi-dono!"

"All right!"

Mogami was not about to take defeat lying down. He gathered his troops as he became aware of their presence. Defense of the castle immediately firmed. The path ahead was lost in the crowd of Mogami skeletal warriors, who attacked like a roaring avalanche.

"Uck...!"

A warrior's swing of the sword grazed Takaya's chest. Chiaki exorcised him.

"You okay, Kagetora!"

"Sorry! ...!"

A warrior attacked Ayako from behind!

"Nee-san !"

"bai!"

Shuyrp!

Naoe's cry caught the warrior in the nick of time.

Like the brutal *Yasha* , the vengeful gods for which they were named, they exorcised all attackers indiscriminately.

"Outta my way, or I'll cut you apart—!"

Takaya swung the *Sword of Bishamonten* , looking like a demon with blood running into his eyes and blood-thirst in the 'aura' around him.

The defenders could no longer keep up with them. They could now see the *Sendai Museum* at the site of the Third Wing, but they didn't have the leisure to ascertain their position.

Boom!

The sound of a loud explosion.

A <<nenpa >>

smashed the pavement at their feet and threw scores of warriors flying. Chiaki yelled, shielding himself, "That how you wanna play, you assholes!"

Rumble.

The ground roared, and Chiaki's <<nenpa >> exploded right in the midst of the warriors blocking their way. A few turned into pillars of flame. Warriors flew through the air. In the mayhem spirits ran every which way trying to escape. The blast scythed down the trees as if they were straws!

"Oooooou!"

Shigezane swung his sword. Takaya cut down the warriors attacking him from the right.

"!"

But one had come up right behind him. Takaya lost his balance as he ducked the sword-stroke. His foot tripped on a shallow stair, and he fell to the asphalt. A blade swung down at him!

"Kagetora-sama!"

Bang!

The warrior flew through the air with a violent shower of sparks. He had crashed into Naoe's <<goshinha >>. Naoe dashed to Takaya's side and kneeled, panting heavily.

"Are you all right, Kagetora-sama?"

"Yeah... This is nothing. ...!"

Another <<nenpa >> suddenly exploded right next to them. He wove a <<goshinha >> to shield Naoe.

"Dammit..."

"Kagetora-sama!"

Takaya thrust the sword into the ground and leaned against it.

"Right. We shouldn't be trying to deal with these skeletons like this—it's too inefficient." His eyes glinted as he yelled, swinging the Sword, "Let's charge straight to the top!"

"What is that uproar...!"

Mogami Yoshiaki directed his troops from the viewing platform at the Aoba Castle Ruins . He was rebuking the nue for the slowness of his main army when—

"What is that voice! What hath happened!"

"Dono!"

A messenger had arrived.

"The Date battalion we spotted hath broken through the Third Wing and is advancing in this direction!"

"Masamune?!"

"They carry some terrible power that is making soldiers disappear before even exchanging blows!"

Yoshiaki's eyes narrowed sharply.

"What?!"

"bai!"

Skeletal warriors disappeared one after another. A great melee had unfolded in the vicinity of [Aoba Castle](#) 's Third Wing between Mogami's soldiers and the combined forces of [Date Shigezane](#) 's troops and the Uesugi [Yasha-shuu](#) .

Shigezane shouted from within the flames and howls, "Leave this place to us and go, Uesugi-dono!"

Nodding towards Shigezane's voice, Takaya shouted to the other three, "Forget about everything else! Our target is Yoshiaki! Just open the path!"

"At your command!"

Naoe, Chiaki, and Ayako moved forward according to Takaya's orders.

They cleared the path of the skeletal warriors that stood in their way and charged up the precipitous slope leading to the Main Citadel.

Explosions marked their progress.

Their goal was Mogami Yoshiaki alone!

"Get back—!"

Takaya's Sword roared. A company of cavalry surged towards them from the cliff.

"Go on ahead, Kagetora!" Chiaki yelled, forming the mudra of Bishamonten .

"bai!"

"We'll leave things here to you, Chiaki!"

Takaya and the others slipped past the paralyzed warriors. Chiaki chanted and shouted, "For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"

Takaya, Ayako, and Naoe struggled towards the remains of the gate. Behind them, the ferocious light of <<kouhou-choubuku >> flashed. Warriors attacked them from the top of the stone stairs. Takaya mowed them down with the Sword of Bishamonten , eliciting screams and enraged bellows. Ayako and Naoe formed the ritual gesture, shielding Takaya.

"bai!"

"bai!"

The soldiers guarding the door collapsed. They dashed right up and through it. Yoshiaki would be ahead of them. They took no notice of anything else. The core of the army would be in the Main Citadel.

"Get away, you small-fry!"

Takaya swung the **Sword of Bishamonten** with all his might. Naoe finished off their pursuers. But more warriors coiled about them.

"What an annoyance. I'll finish them off right here!"

"Haruie!"

"Leave them to me!" Ayako shouted, and kneeled. She pressed her hands against the ground, yelling, "Yooooou—!"

Fire erupted violently from the ground. The razor-sharp flames ripped through the warriors.

"bai!"

Ayako caught the soldiers in her <<**gebaku**>>. Her ferocious <<power>> paralyzed countless warriors.

Takaya and Naoe sprinted for the viewing platform.

"Neagh!"

Yoshiaki became aware of his soldiers' confusion.

At the last fortress, the men possessed by Mogami spirits attacked Takaya and Naoe to protect their lord.

A violent explosion. Smashed concrete. But Takaya ignored it all. He released his will, shouting, "Get outta my waaay—!"

Whump!

The spirit vessels flew through the air. Naoe immediately yelled, "bai!"

The spirits disappeared with a *shuyrp*.

Trees burst into flame.

A single middle-aged man remained standing before them.

"You cursed—...!"

The man looked at them, shaking in rage.

"Representative Ueshima. No..." Naoe's eyes flashed. "[Mogami Yoshiaki](#)!"

Cornered, Yoshiaki returned Takaya and Naoe's glares with composure.

"Ah. Thou art the General of the [Meikai Uesugi Army](#) , [Uesugi Kagetora](#) ?"

"You've been giving us a hell of a lot of trouble, pops," Takaya panted, smiling fearlessly. "Now we've finally caught you. So stop this stupid shit and go quietly to the other world. Your son is waiting for you by the [Sanzu River](#) ."

"Such vulgar speech, Uesugi." Yoshiaki bent his head. "I, [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) cannot be defeated by the likes of you!"

"Hmm, I think I've heard that one before," Takaya snorted scornfully, and a smile suddenly curved the corners of his mouth. "Even without you, the people living now can eventually move the capital themselves if need be. You thrusting your big nose into it just created victims."

"..."

"This is the vengeance of those who died for what you wanted. It's unbearable taking revenge for the ones who died so long time ago, but somebody's gotta do it, or they wouldn't be able to rest in peace."

Takaya added, shouldering the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) , "They're behind you even now..."

"What?! ...Uwagh!"

He turned. Behind him, a countless number of unresting ghosts floated, hatred on their hideously disintegrated faces...

"Th-these are..."

"A bit too late to be shocked. These are the dead swept up in your conspiracy. Since you're a spirit like them, you should understand their feelings. No, there's no way you don't understand!"

"Th-thou...!"

Yoshiaki glared at Naoe beside him.

"Didst thou guide them here? Damn thee, was't not thou who caused Yoshi to disappear? Thou killed her to escape! And what of Kojirou!"

Naoe replied in a low voice, "I did not escape. Kojirou-dono let me go."

"What...! Kojirou set thee free?" Yoshiaki was dumbfounded. "That cannot be. That...!"

"Kojirou-dono did not truly want to be with Mogami. It was all thrust upon him by a mother with dreams of her son ruling the country."

"Then Kojirou..."

"Your allies are all gone." Takaya stated flatly. "You're a fool to trust a child of the Date instead of your own son."

"Mwr...Thou...!"

"Let's stop the chit-chat, Yoshiaki." A deep crimson shimmer flared from Takaya's body. "It's about time we end this!"

"!"

Yoshiaki straightened and immediately cried, "[Zaou Gongen](#) of [Dewa](#) , lend me thy protection!"

Takaya and Naoe abruptly stilled. A strong 'energy' surrounded Yoshiaki's body. The ground rumbled, and an enraged fire-bearing three-eyed god appeared before their eyes and towered over them.

"What...!"

This was the protective deity of the sacred mountain of [Dewa](#) Yamagata, [Zaou Gongen](#) .

[Zaou Gongen](#) inhaled deeply and spat out crimson flames.

"Uwagh!" Takaya cried as he leapt back, "You can't scare me with that!"

"Kagetora-sama!"

Naoe shielded Takaya from [Zaou Gongen](#) 's fierce flames. He shot a <<[nenpa](#) >> at the deity, to little effect. [Zaou Gongen](#) continued to spit his fire at them.

"Well?! Even Uesugi's [Yasha-shuu](#) cannot <<exorcise>> the gods!"

"Dammit!"

The conflagration blazed around them. Naoe held onto his <<[goshinha](#)>> desperately, but the flames were too strong.

"Naoe!"

Chiaki's voice came from behind them. He and Ayako had arrived.

"Bastard!"

Chiaki and Ayako hammered at [Zaou Gongen](#) with their <<[nenpa](#)>>, but the deity seemed to feel it as little as if he'd been struck with pebbles. His eyes narrowed sharply, and he spat his flames at them.

"Ugh...!"

Chiaki shouted, holding back the flames, "Naoe! The [koppashin](#) ! Attack him!"

Naoe started and reached into his jacket's breast pocket.

(Of course!) he thought, and immediately drew it out from his jacket's inner pocket. It was the [koppashin](#) Chiaki had given him earlier.

Naoe threw it at [Zaou Gongen](#) as he chanted [Shoumen Kongou](#) 's mantra.

"[On deibayakisha manda manda kakakaka sowaka](#) ."

He drew a large [seed symbol](#) in midair.

"un2!"

Shoumen Kongou appeared within a sudden howling gale. Zaou Gongen 's three eyes glared at him.

The newly-summoned deity commenced an attack against Zaou Gongen .

"Kagetora! Ignore them! Get the caster—take out Yoshiaki!"

"Okay!"

"!"

Yoshiaki turned, his face twitching with fear. Takaya sprinted towards him, his body surrounded by a breathtakingly radiant aura. The Sword of Bishamonten glowed brilliantly.

"Namu Tobatsu Bishamonten !" Brandishing the Sword, Takaya shouted, "For this demon subjugation, lend me thy power!"



"Stop...co-come not near me!"

Yoshiaki stepped back, releasing <<nenpa >> after <<nenpa >> in panicked fear. But Takaya blocked then all with his <<goshinha >> and struck at Yoshiaki without breaking his run. Plasmatic light scattered from the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) , and for an instant Takaya's aura took on the form of [Bishamonten](#) .

In that moment the Sword—

Stabbed into Ueshima's body.

[Mogami Yoshiaki](#) 's terrible scream pierced the sky.

The [Sword of Bishamonten](#) glowed pure white as it ran Yoshiaki through.

"<<[Choubuku](#) >>!"

!

A fierce luminescence shielded his body.

It swelled with intense power and enveloped [Shoumen Kongou](#) and [Zaou Gongen](#) . The explosion of [choubuku](#) light engulfed the viewing platform in the blink of an eye, then the whole of [Aoba Castle](#) .

Yoshiaki's dying screams went on and on.

An all-consuming <<[choubuku](#) >> energy—

That immense power transformed into a storm which knocked down the trees and shook the ground violently.

The maelstrom of light swallowed Mogami's drawn-out cries.

Takaya clenched his teeth, gripping the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) .

The Sword began to reabsorb the light—the swirling, ferocious light that pulled [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) 's soul into the underworld.

Night descended on the viewing platform once more.

Takaya pulled the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) out of Ueshima's body gently. The spirit vessel crumbled to the ground.

[Zaou Gongen](#) had disappeared. [Shoumen Kongou](#) returned to the [koppashin](#) .

The spirit of [Sengoku](#) General [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) of [Dewa](#) had been <<exorcised>> by [Uesugi Kagetora](#) 's hand.

Silence fell around them.

Takaya kneeled and held his hand up to Ueshima's nostrils. He was breathing, uninjured. Neither the spirit vessel's body nor soul had been harmed.

"Kagetora-sama..."

Naoe walked up to him.

Takaya looked fixedly down at Ueshima, once more an ordinary person now that Yoshiaki's soul had been driven out.

He murmured haltingly without turning, "Now...will Kokuryou-san's wife forgive me?"

"..."

Naoe's eyes softened with sympathy. He replied slowly, "Yes, surely..."

Takaya bit his lip. The hand that gripped the [Sword of Bishamonten](#) shook slightly.

"..."

Naoe took it in his. When Takaya looked up, he softly chanted the mantra of unsummoning, "[On basara bokisha boku](#) ."

The [Sword of Bishamonten](#) quivered and disappeared. The incarnation of [Bishamonten](#) had returned to heaven.

"Kagetora, look."

Ayako was looking down at the city. The brilliantly-lit city of [Sendai](#) . In the vicinity of [Kyougamine](#) , a long line glowing orange like the light of fireflies moved towards the north.

"Masamune's Date army is setting out."

"..."

Masamune and the main body of the Date army were going forth from [Sendai](#) to meet the Nanbu and Satake armies summoned by Yoshiaki.

The spirits of warriors crossed the [Hirose River](#) .

Even without knowing that they were headed for battle, one would have seen loneliness in the pale light that glowed around them. And it—yes. It looked like a funeral procession rather than a column of warriors.

Takaya looked around him.

The statue of [Date Masamune](#) on his horse beside him stood looking down on [Sendai](#) . Takaya gazed up at the dark sky.

In the darkness a single shooting star flowed towards the north, drawing a glowing trail across the sky.

Yuzuru and Kousaka were standing at the foot of [Hyoujoukawara Bridge](#) near [Kyougamine](#) , gazing after the Date army.

Yuzuru turned to look at [Aoba Castle](#) .

(Takaya...)

"Have they finally managed to destroy [Mogami Yoshiaki](#) ?"

a young man murmured, his silken hair stirring in the night wind. The half-blood youth, who looked around fifteen or sixteen, crossed his arms and scoffed, "Humph, I thought I'd have some fun with Mogami, but he was foolish. All bark and no bite."

The young man had a cherubic face; his eyes alone held a shiver-inducing cruelty. He murmured, "It is not so simple to control the puppet strings that make an entire country dance."

The young man with the chestnut hair called out to another young man standing on the riverbank near him, "Did that help, Kojirou-dono?"

"__"

Date Masamune 's younger brother, Date Kojirou , gazed at the faraway line of Date warriors setting out for battle.

The sound of the river drowned out the tumult of the distant city.

"Let's go, Kojirou-dono," Mori Ranmaru pressed.

"... Yes."

Kojirou walked away, still looking over his shoulder at the line of Date warriors.

(Aniue ...)

At the riverbank, the sound of the flowing water alone remained.

No human voices spoke.

And then there was only the whisper of the night wind.

Chapter 9: The dragon soaring in the Milky Way

Two days after that night.

They ran around tying up various loose ends the next day, so it was only the day after that when things finally calmed down.

Shigezane brought them hour-by-hour progress reports on Masamune's battle. Date

military forces had overwhelmed the opposition; Nanbu and Oosaki had been destroyed, and Satake sent into retreat. They would return in triumph to Sendai tomorrow.

The dissolution of Mogami's <<jike-kekkai >> meant that the mass hypnosis on Sendai had also been erased, so of course the plan to transfer the capital had

gone up in smoke. Peace returned to the city, where one could almost believe nothing of note occurred.

Only the unanswered questions remained, to be taken up loudly by the mass media: questions regarding the mysterious sequence of events from

that night and the reason for sudden furor over the transfer of the capital plan...

Then some good news dropped on them from the hospital.

Kokuryou had regained consciousness.

Clear, bright sunlight flowed into the hospital room from the open door.

Kokuryou smiled at them from the bed.

"Ah, you finally came."

Takaya stood frozen at the door.

"Gramps..."

Kokuryou's face had regained a healthy color, and he looked almost like another person. According to the doctor, he had made a rapid recovery, and now looked nothing like a man who had been in serious condition just a few days ago.

"Kokuryou-san. I'm sorry for..."

"Ah, we finally meet again, Yoshiaki.

Kokuryou smiled gently at Naoe, then at Ayako, who was holding a bouquet in her arms.

"Here. Stop standing around over there and come in. All three of you."

"..."

They closed the door at Kokuryou's urging and came to stand next to his pillow.

Kokuryou took another look at Takaya in silence.

"In the short time since I saw you last, your face has matured a great deal, young monk."

"..."

"Have you understood a bit of what I've told you?"

Takaya hung his head, unable to bear Kokuryou's words. His fists shook.

He suddenly fell to his knees on the floor and prostrated himself.

"Young monk?!"

"That's just it, Gramps!" Takaya cried, his hands pressed against the floor. "I...don't know what I can say to apologize! Even if I apologize...no matter how much I apologize, I can't get her back for you...! You probably can't forgive me for that! But I... It was my fault...!" Kokuryou's smile disappeared as he looked down at Takaya. In a voice wrenched from the depths of his heart, Takaya begged, "Forgive me...!"

Naoe looked at him, frozen in place. Ayako's gaze was full of pity.

Takaya kneeled unmoving, his head pressed against the floor.

Kokuryou gazed at Takaya.

"... Is this about my wife?"

Takaya didn't move.

"It's true that... If you hadn't come to [Sendai](#) , she probably would not have died."

"!"

Takaya's head jerked up if he'd been hit.

But there was only a terrible gentleness on Kokuryou's face.

"If hating you could bring her back... I would curse you to the depths of hell. I would hate you with all my heart."

"..."

"But to continue living, smoldering with hatred... I am already an old man." Takaya stared at him in amazement. Kokuryou continued quietly but

sternly, "Young monk. If you truly want to atone for her, don't forget her. Carve the death of Kokuryou Shizuko, carve her life into your soul so that it will never disappear."

"..."

"You shouldn't think such things. To carve another person's life into your soul is to carry a heavy burden on your back. A small human being like you would not be able to encompass it."

Takaya listened, not stirring an inch.

"You would soon be useless, unable to walk forward. You cannot do it. No one can. However." And Kokuryou said to Takaya quietly, "Those who do not forget the importance of others will, before they know it, become aware of the importance of their own selves."

"..."

"Listen, young monk," Kokuryou said forcefully, "become a big human being. You don't need to be strong. Be big. Then one day...you will be able to accept your past, your sins, the crimes of others against you."

Naoe's eyes suddenly widened. Kokuryou glanced at Naoe, but turned back to Takaya.

"Ougi Takaya. I look with anticipation to your future," Kokuryou said, and smiled.

Takaya felt Kokuryou's big-hearted affection enfolding his heart, and heat spread in his chest.

He *had* to reply.

"I promise..." he replied with determination. "I promise. ...I will."

A satisfied smile filled Kokuryou's face, and he nodded firmly.

"I like the look in those eyes," Kokuryou said once again.

The three of them spent around twenty minutes with Kokuryou, telling him of the events of the past few days and of their plans to leave [Sendai](#) on the next day. Then they went home.

"I'll come visit again tomorrow, so see you then."

Takaya left the room as Kokuryou nodded at Ayako. Ayako and Naoe

followed.

"Yoshiaki."

"?"

Naoe stopped and turned as Kokuryou called to him. Kokuryou beckoned to him.

"There is something I would like to speak to you about."

"To me?"

Looking a little dubious, Naoe told Ayako and Takaya to go on ahead, then shut the door and returned to Kokuryou's side.

"What is it?"

Kokuryou looked at the door for a moment, then told Naoe in a low voice, "It's about your young monk..."

For dinner, the five of them, including Yuzuru and Chiaki, went down to the hotel lounge. Now that they could relax at last, they finally had the time to savor the food.

Over after-dinner coffee, Naoe said to all concerned, "We'll withdraw from [Sendai](#) tomorrow. Nagahide and Yuzuru-san can go straight home to [Matsumoto](#) . Haruie..."

"You want me to go to [Akita](#) , don't you? Geez, I never get a break."

Naoe smiled wryly and nodded as Ayako pouted. Takaya asked, holding his cup, "What about me? What should I do?"

"I will need to ask you to go with me to Tokyo. We must

<<exorcise>> Ashina Moriuji from his spirit vessel,

Representative Hirabayashi. I have already purchased tickets for the bullet train, so please accompany me for a little while longer."

"Ack—! We're gonna do it again?!"

"Huh? Didn't you come here by car, Naoe?" Chiaki asked, and Naoe made a face.

"It was demolished in Yamagata."

"What?! The Benz?!"

"The Cefiro. What should I tell my family...?"

Ayako immediately followed up with, "So then so then are you going to get a new car? I think you should go for a Supra! Definitely a Supra!"

Chiaki glared at her.

"Ugh! Dammit, Haruie, you have *horrible* taste!"

"What? What's wrong with my taste?!"

"If you're looking for a Nissan, the Skyline is nice...it's really pretty cool," Yuzuru said, and Chiaki and Ayako immediately yelled him down. The conversation suddenly devolved into a new car selection

conference.

Takaya interjected in exasperation, "But Naoe, the Cefiro really does suit you, don't you think?"

"Are you telling me to buy one before going home?"

The debate, completely disregarded by its purported beneficiary, flared white-hot, and their last night in [Sendai](#) broke up on an odd climax.

In the hall on the way back to their rooms, Naoe called to Yuzuru, "Yuzuru-san, a moment."

"Yes?"

Yuzuru followed Naoe to the D-Room on the first floor. There he heard what Kokuryou had told Naoe.

"I see..." Yuzuru murmured, sighing. "So he did see his mother."

"Yuzuru-san, do you know her address here in [Sendai](#) ?"

"Yeah. I mean, I got a little worried when I heard that he was in [Sendai](#) ."

Yuzuru looked off into the distance. "When I met Takaya, we were in first year of junior high—that was when he was most out of control. It was a really awful time. He would smoke and not do his class-work and looked like he could become violent at any time. He didn't talk much and would always stare right at you, so most of the students were too scared to go near him."

"..."

"There wasn't anything else she could do—he probably knew it too, but... That was a short while after his mother left. He tried riding a motorcycle and inhaling paint thinner and stuff like that. But because of his dad's drunken rages, at least drinking was one thing he didn't try." Yuzuru gave a little laugh, his eyes fixed on the ground. "You'd probably laugh if I told you what finally happened. ...Even though he was so out of control, somewhere in the back of his head he must have wanted someone to care about him. 'Cause he was a kid, too," Yuzuru said, and smiled. "Takaya is fine."

"Is he?"

"Yeah. If he had the chance, he'd probably be more honest. Even though he pushes her away, his mother is definitely there in his heart. He feels like he needs to apologize. It's just that he can't say it straight out. I think Takaya wants an excuse, too. He probably can't do it unless someone helps him out. So," he added, smiling at Naoe, "he'll definitely be okay if you're with him."

"I'm being encouraged, then," Naoe smiled too, just a little. "Thank you so much for coming. It was certainly thanks to you that we were able to resolve this incident. We'll probably have to ask for your help again in the future..."

"Yeah. Though I wish I knew what I did to help..." Yuzuru wondered with a still-mystified expression on his face.

Looking at him, Naoe recalled what Kousaka had said on another occasion.

"If Kagetora is to fulfill Kenshin's last wishes, then control of that person is his aim," Kousaka said, looking at Yuzuru. "What happens twice will happen thrice. Take care to avoid repeating the same thing a third time, Naoe."

"What?"

"Since separating Kagetora from those most important to him is your forte."

That was what Kousaka had said to him before leaving.

Did he mean that Naoe would tear apart the friendship between Yuzuru and Takaya?

(No...)

Naoe set down his coffee cup softly.

(I would never do that.)

That alone he would never do.

Even as he made that inward vow, Naoe suddenly remembered.

That it was he who had torn apart Kagetora and Kagekatsu, two adopted

sons, two friends, with the laws of the Sengoku in the [Otake no Ran](#) .

And then...

Before the nightmare of thirty years ago, he had unquestionably made this self-same inward vow in front of Minako...

Cars flowed slowly by beyond the windows.

A bustling city night.

"Welcome home!"

Shigezane and [Megohime](#) had gone out to greet the returning army that same night. The

victorious Masamune had returned to the Date mansion unharmed, in front

of which [Megohime](#) and Shigezane stood waiting for him.

"I have returned," Masamune said, no discernable trace of tiredness on his glowing face. "Did aught of note occur while we were away?"

"Not at all. My... That was thanks to thee as well."

"Good."

Masamune nodded in satisfaction, then handed his sword to Kojuurou beside him and stepped inside.

"The battle was a complete victory for us. That accursed Satake ran off with his tail between his legs in total defeat."

"Truly, if the haleness of the Date army were made known to the other lords, we have a good opportunity."

"Dono—" Shigezane presented a letter to Masamune. "Uesugi-dono came to visit thee today."

"What?! Uesugi-dono?"

"Aye. He seems prepared for departure from [Sendai](#) tomorrow. He wished to bid thee farewell, but thou wert not yet returned. So did he entrust this note to me."

Masamune took the letter.

"He left his best regards."

"..."

He opened the letter and began to read. Kagetora had written of his thanks for the assistance of the Date and included tidings of his mother, Ohigashi, and Kojirou, his brother. "Tell my brother," Kojirou had asked of Naoe...

That I do not hate him.

(Kojirou...)

Masamune looked down quietly.

As if in prayer for his mother and younger brother. Then Masamune's single clear eye opened.

"Kojuurou. Shigezane."

"Yes, my lord!"

"I am resolved."

Kojuurou and Shigezane's eyes widened in surprise.

"We will form an alliance with Takeda."



"!"

"Dono!"

Masamune stated, his eyes hard with determination, "That Oda doth advance into the Northeast is a fact we cannot ignore. We cannot battle Takeda on the one hand and Oda on the other, both at once. Far better to smash one side first." Masamune's single eye smiled. "To take the country, we must one day destroy both."

Everyone spoke at once in surprise.

"Dono! That's...!"

"This battle hath changed the course of my thinking," Masamune said, and cast his gaze far into the distance. "I have finally remembered. In

my previous life, I could do naught but regret my late birth. Times beyond counting did I mourn that fact, for if I had been born but twenty years earlier, I would certainly have ruled the country. —That thought remained unchanged in my heart even as I grew old."

Masamune looked at his two commanders, his eyes bright.

"Just twenty years. Perhaps now that I am dead, my wish hath finally been granted."

"Dono!"

"For the One-Eyed Dragon who came too late, is this not the greatest of opportunities?"

Masamune cast his gaze over his trusted vassals.

"The ambitions of the One-Eyed Dragon have revived at last. Yea, the dream of the Date's Japan is not over. Most surely will the sun rise over a country ruled by the Date!"

His vassals yelled, their faces aglow:

"Dono!"

"Dono—!"

Masamune turned to Kojuurou and Shigezane, overflowing with confidence

"Well? Shigezane. Kojuurou."

Shigezane's face blazed.

"Yes! *This* is our lord! *This* is [Date Masamune](#) , our One-Eyed Dragon, Lord Masamune!"

Masamune looked at Kojuurou. Kojuurou's smile was wry, resigned—then his eyes filled again with a warrior's fighting spirit, and he answered, "I, Katakura Kagetsuna, will follow thee to the ends of the earth!"

"Good!"

Masamune—the One-Eyed Dragon Masamune—proclaimed loudly to all, "We will enter the battle of the <<[Yami-Sengoku](#) >>, and certes will Date rule! I, [Date Masamune](#) , will take the country!"

Ooooooooo—!

The mighty shout thundered through the mansion.

And following, a great victory cheer.

Ei-ei-o—!

Ei-ei-o—!

The roar of the One-Eyed Dragon pierced the heavens.

The Sengoku Age began now.

Epilogue

"There's still some time before the train leaves," Naoe said as he handed Takaya his ticket at the bullet train ticket gate at [Sendai Station](#) .

Takaya and Naoe were finally departing from [Sendai](#) .

Yuzuru and Chiaki had already left by car from the hotel that morning.

Ayako had gone with Takaya and Naoe to say goodbye to Kokuryou, then left them at the station and caught an older railway to [Akita](#) . She would keep an eye on Satake from there.

"Shall we go in, Takaya-san?"

"Eh. ...Yeah."

"What is the matter?"

Takaya absentmindedly combed his hair back and said, "I guess...well...a lot of things happened..."

"Is it difficult to part from this place?" Naoe's eyes dipped quietly.

"I asked to be contacted when the date for the funeral of Kokuryou-san's wife is determined. The next time we come, it would be good if we had more time for leisure, wouldn't it?"

"Yeah—but..." Takaya said, and turned to look behind him again. He'd done it countless times since they'd arrived at the station.

Naoe asked quietly, "Did you forget something...?"

"—"

Takaya looked down.

Then he turned back to the gate.

"... No, it's nothing."

And he inserted the ticket.

He could come to [Sendai](#) again. Whenever he wanted. Yes. So it was fine. Next time he would be

able to face her with more honesty. And when he did, he wanted to apologize to her. He wanted to tell her how he truly felt. He would surely be able meet her with gentle feelings in his heart.

I never hated you.

And until then...

He climbed the stairs up to the platform. A train was already waiting on Track 14. Its doors were closed—perhaps its interior was still being cleaned.

He began to walk along the platform to check the train's number. Then—

"..."

His feet stopped.

A tiny woman stood by herself in front of their compartment door.

She didn't seem to be a passenger. She was dressed in everyday clothes and had the look of a housewife. On the platform still largely devoid of passengers, she stood holding a paper bag in her hand, perhaps as a souvenir gift to someone.

She noticed him.

Takaya stopped breathing.

A gentle smile spread across her face.

And then she called to him in a tender voice, "Takaya..."

"__"

Naoe prevented him from stepping back. Takaya stared at Sawako, his eyes wide.

(Mom...)

Sawako walked up to Takaya and bowed politely to Naoe. Then she said gently, "Are you going home already?"

"..."

"There were things I wanted to speak to you about, but..."

Sawako sighed slightly and shook her head in resignation.

Then she gave him a smile small.

"Come visit again anytime. Next time we'll be able to take our time, right?"

"..."

Takaya, his eyes wide as he stood frozen in place, made no reply.

Sawako looked directly up at Takaya.

"There are so many things I want to ask about you, about Miya. But surely..."

"—"

Train information announcements echoed around the station. The 116 Tokyo Express on Track 14 opened its doors.

"You'll come see me again, won't you?"

Takaya looked down at the ground, his lips pressed tight.

Sawako held the paper bag in her hand towards Takaya.

"Here... I didn't have much time, so it's nothing fancy, but I brought you some snacks. Eat them with Miya, okay?"

"..."

Naoe could see Takaya's fists trembling. Sawako smiled at Takaya, still holding out the paper bag.

She said, her heart in her words, "Be well, Takaya."

"..."

Takaya said nothing. He moved away as if trying to escape. His shoulder

struck Sawako's glancingly, and she staggered. Naoe called to him, "Takaya-san."

Takaya didn't turn. He stepped onto the train, back toward her as if in rejection.

Sawako stared after her son in a stunned daze.

Naoe spoke to her, and they appeared to exchange a few words, but...

The departure time quickly approached.

Naoe climbed on board and went to Takaya. In his hand was the paper bag given him by Sawako.

Sawako was still standing on the platform.

Takaya glared at the opposite wall.

"Takaya-san," Naoe said to him quietly. "Was there not something you wanted to tell your mother?"

"..."

"There is still time. Your mother is still waiting."

Takaya didn't turn. He asked in a low voice, not looking at him, "... Did you tell her?"

Naoe had probably given her their train information yesterday. Without answering the question, Naoe said calmly, "You don't...want to regret anything else, do you?"

"..."

"You want to forgive your mother, don't you? You've always wanted to be kind to her, haven't you?"

Takaya glared fixedly out the window.

Naoe looked at him, a terrible gentleness in his eyes.

"You should stop lying to yourself."

"..."

Sawako, still standing on the platform, gazed through the window at Takaya

She had the same look in her eyes as she did that day five years ago in the moss rose garden— Takaya knew that without turning.

A plea for forgiveness, a mother's...

The one-minute-until-departure warning sounded in the train. Passengers hurried onboard. Station employees rushed back and forth on the platform.

Sawako looked fixedly at Takaya.

Naoe said urgently, "Takaya-san."

Takaya didn't move.

The departure bell chimed.

A long, long chime.

Sawako stood stock-still on the platform...

"..."

How could he not know?

Her feelings—his mother's feelings—as she stood below him forcing a smile onto her face.

He knew quite well. Exactly what he should do. What he wanted to do.

Or could it be that his true self had not forgiven his mother after all?

(No...)

It wasn't because he didn't forgive her. It was not a question of forgiveness
It wasn't about that.

(I, just...)

As he realized it—

The departure bell stopped.

"!"

Takaya leapt up from his seat.

He thought of nothing else.

He cut in front of Naoe and hurried towards the passage to the deck.

(Mom...!)

He pushed past the passengers, waited impatiently for the automatic door to open, and flew out onto the deck.

Sawako was at the top of the stairs.

She stared at the son who had materialized on the deck, her eyes wide.

"Takaya...!"

"..."

His feet stopped, and for a moment he stood frozen. Then the emotions pounding in his chest roused him to motion.

He stepped forward, holding out his hand instinctively.

Sawako reached for her child from the platform.

But the closing doors, ignorant as they were of human sentiments, prevented mother and child from touching.

Takaya looked at Sawako, his hands pressed against the glass.

The train began to move.

Sawako walked slowly along the platform as if keeping pace.

Takaya's mouth moved, but Sawako could no longer hear the words.

The train gradually gathered speed.

Sawako's eyes swelled with tears as she chased after it.

Takaya shouted something desperately, but knew that it could no longer reach her. And he began to simply call her name.

Sawako fell further behind.

Tears spilled from her eyes.

"Mom... Mom...!"

He could only continue to shout the one word, his hands pressed against the glass, all his love swelling irrepressibly out of him.

"Mother!"

Clack...

The bullet train slid out of [Sendai Station](#) .

Sawako, left behind on the platform, stood staring at the departing express until the last car was out of sight. How long did she stand there?

He could no longer see the platform.

Takaya had not noticed Naoe coming up behind him as he stood frozen at the door.

He was leaning with his arm against the glass, his eyes fixed in the distance, motionless.

"Takaya-san..." Naoe said, and Takaya said in a low voice out of his silence,

"Stay over there..."

"..."

Naoe watched over Takaya quietly.

He took a single step closer. Takaya instantly whirled.

"Don't come near me!"

Naoe's feet halted.

Takaya's eyes filled.

"..."

Naoe's eyes as he looked at Takaya were full of sympathy.

"Is that a command?"

Takaya was silent. He closed his mouth and once again turned his back.

Answered in a low voice, "It's...not a command."

"..."

Naoe quietly walked up to him. Then, standing as if to embrace him from

behind, he placed his hands softly on Takaya's shoulders.

Takaya bowed his head, unable to hold back his tears any longer.

They began to flow in the moment Naoe's hands settled on his shoulders.

The expression on Sawako's face in the moment he had reached for her was burned into his vision. And she had—yes, she had looked straight at him with those same unchanged eyes and reached for his hand with her own.

Those familiar hands which had held him as a child in those distant happy days.

(Mom...)

It hadn't been because he couldn't forgive her. He only—

Wanted to be with her.

He wanted to be with her always, to live with her always. Even now.

That was his simple, childish wish.

Even as he understood that it was impossible, that it was far too late.

Even as he understood that the way things were was the way they should be.

The wish that could not be granted lay cradled in his heart.

That heartfelt...!

"I want to be with you always—"



The long-dried tears overflowed and spilled endlessly, ceaselessly out of him.

As if standing guard over that place, Naoe remained at Takaya's side as he cried.

The empty deck.

The tears that he had locked inside him for so long, that he had refused to show anyone...

Continued to flow.

They could no longer be stopped.

Surely everything—

Began now, at this very moment.

The bullet train left the City of Trees behind and raced on a straight course towards Tokyo.

The sun pierced through the clouds and illuminated the tracks ahead.

The rain-soaked rails glistened with its gift of light.

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